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## "Yells of Life in Constant Change": The Sonorous Criticism of Amiri Baraka

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“Yells of Life in Constant Change”:  
The Sonorous Criticism of Amiri Baraka

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by  
Jack McKeon

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Introduction

Few American poets have been more controversial, and less understood, than Amiri Baraka. A writer and musician active from the late 1950s until his death in 2013; an activist who at times advocated for the murder of all white people; a close friend of many queer artists who nonetheless frequently employed homophobic rhetoric in his prose: Amiri Baraka is all of these things, yet at times it feels like he is much more or even something different entirely. He was a writer deeply skeptical of inherited theories of aesthetics who managed to push at the theoretical fringes of criticism while also producing beautiful prose.

My experience with and knowledge of Baraka's work stretches over a five year period, though I never intended to dedicate my senior project to his work. I was given a copy of his *Dutchman and The Slave* by a teacher in my high school and for years he only existed in my mind as the author of two jarring plays. I remembered his anger, if nothing more. It was three years later in the fall of my junior year that Baraka re-inserted himself in my life. While enduring what will hopefully remain one of the most difficult times in my life, I read his "Way Out West" for Marisa Libbon's Literature 103 course and sections of *Blues People* for Ann Lauterbach's course on the New York School. At a time where everything seemed to be moving faster than I could understand, Baraka's writing allowed me to slow down. His writing gave me something to cling to, a moment of suspension in the beauty of his poetry and in the vibrancy of his inquiry. Still, I gave little thought to Baraka. As he writes in "Way Out West", I was "merely /coming into things by degrees" (*SOS* 26).

This project supposes that there is something to be heard within Amiri Baraka's writing, that his authorial "voice" is more significant than we often suppose voice or tone to express in text. I seek to rectify what I see as a wrong that has been committed, without intention or malevolence, to the written work of Amiri Baraka. I see a failure in only studying Baraka's most popular or infamous works such as *Blues People*, *Dutchman*, or his first poetry collection *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. Not only does one risk only seeing Baraka as one thing — critic, playwright, or poet — but reading just one "kind" of Baraka text denies the reader the ability to see his larger goals. This project asserts that Baraka used several literary forms in order to move towards a voice that mixed critical rigor, poetic beauty, and the language of black popular culture. I choose to orient my study on finding various modalities of sound within Baraka's language as a way to draw an overarching linkage of his work in the 1960s and 1970s. I believe that this method may offer a way to justify or contextualize the ubiquity of Baraka's literary production and his constant genre-switching. For example, in 1965 alone Baraka published a novella, a collection of essays, a manifesto on theater, and recorded several of his poems with the New York Art Quartet for their eponymous album. On top of these, Baraka published countless music reviews for publications such as *Downbeat* and *The Cricket*, many of which remain difficult to locate, and iterations of essays that would appear later in *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965*.

As is the nature of a project of this length, many works that have been read and studied for this study exist as invisible actors, inspirations that for issues of time and focus do not feature within the arguments I build in the following three chapters. Before beginning a project on Amiri Baraka, I knew I had a desire to write a project concerned with sound or aurality in American

literature. I didn't know who I wanted to focus on or what time period I wanted to study, but I had an interest in exploring these ideas as they pertained to the construction of race in literature. These ideas stem from Alex Benson's Soundscapes in American Literature seminar conducted in the spring of 2019. This course introduced me to the idea of listening to a text, and challenged me to reassess the ways in which I attempt to inhabit the texts I study. Two works that influenced this nascent project, texts which I read before much of what this project eventually was built on, were Pierre Schaeffer's essay "Acousmatics" from the anthology *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* and Jennifer Lynn Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. Returning to these texts at the conclusion of this project I realize that though they do not appear in my chapters, the ideas posited by Schaeffer and Stoever have inspired the interventions I have tried to make in the work of Amiri Baraka. In "Acousmatics," Schaeffer writes about the material culture of recording technologies. His example uses the magnetic tape used in cassettes and in reel-to-reel analog recording, but we can think of his points in the more modern (yet still outdated) technology of the CD. Schaeffer writes,

"Although it is materialized by the magnetic tape, the object, as we are defining it, is not on the tape either. What is on the tape is only the magnetic trace of a signal: a *sonorous support* or an *acoustic signal*. ... The object is not an object except to our listening, it is relative to it. ... Coming from a world in which we are able to intervene, the sonorous object is nonetheless *contained entirely in our perceptive consciousness*" (Schaeffer 79).

Schaeffer's perception of sonic recording, that the object we study is something different than the object that holds it, and that we in turn can hold in the tactile sense, opens up a deeper dimensions to the question of inquiry that, in his understanding, challenges the very ways in which we make sense of the things put in front of us. By locating a method of reading within

Schaeffer's reading of recording technology, we may see a path towards an experimental way of reading for sound in writing. Finding sound in writing will always seem odd to a certain degree given the obvious limitations of the medium we are working in. Schaeffer's point about the disparity between the object and the material gives a refreshing take on the common understanding of the difference between sign and signifier. The word "apple" will never be the same thing as the fruit we pick in the fall; If I tell you I am drinking "coffee" this morning, it doesn't allow you to taste my drink or know how it smells. This is a woefully simplified argument for the limitations of language, but these alimentary examples move us closer to understanding how Baraka's writing on music and vocal descriptions conjure the reader's abilities as a listener. I can write pages and pages about the coffee I had this morning, my morning ritual of grinding coffee beans, how many cups I like to have, if I prefer cream or half-and-half, and the words themselves won't get me closer to showing you what I am drinking. But if you are a coffee drinker, you may know the ritualistic relationship many coffee drinkers have to their morning, may be able to recall the smell of hot coffee in your own kitchen or the feeling of warming your hands with a hot mug on a cold morning. Thinking of this morning ritual as a written document I've composed, these are experiences that occur outside of the text, internal machinations we as readers perform in order to reach a more meaningful understanding of the text. These machinations are both provoked by the author and performed by the reader, thus sparking a relationship that is primarily textual, but nonetheless something more. Like Schaeffer's magnetic tape, when the senses are evoked, the reader or listener draws on their perceptive consciousness to forge a connection with the material they are engaging.

In this way, it can be said that any reading must be thoroughly social. As the reader draws on past experience, tactile relationships, sense memories, they inevitably flood the text with things that exist independently of it. This is fairly benign when we are thinking of coffee and apples, but becomes increasingly complicated as we push towards topics Baraka, and Stoever, discuss. When we approach terms like “riot” or “scream,” what happens? When we read the word “jazz,” does it conjure an image, a sound? For Stoever, the act of listening offers a way of reading that reorients our considerations of how race is perceived and (re)constructed in text. Without denying the importance of the gaze in many modes of literary study, Stoever’s text is interested in understanding how voice, sound, and hearing each contribute to the construction of race in literature. From the introduction to her *Sonic Color Line*: “Neither reifying nor negating vision, this book trumpets the importance of sound, in particular as a critical modality through which subjects (re)produce, apprehend, and resist imposed racial identities and structures of racist violence” (Stoever 4). Though Stoever moves in directions far different than my own, her work helped me realize that we never approach a text on mute. As readers, it is likely that we *do* in fact think in a primarily visual mode, but that doesn’t mean we relinquish our abilities to hear. Though Baraka makes frequent references to music, often calling out to specific songs, I don’t believe these are the ends to which sound functions within his writing. Furthermore, I don’t believe it is enough to listen to a recording of Thelonius Monk’s “Well You Needn’t” to comprehend how Baraka treats music in his poem of the same name. Sounds, jazz recordings and funk lyrics, screams and gunshots, all offer ways for Baraka to excavate his internal life, but must simultaneously beckon the reader to draw from their own perception. If Stoever is correct, and I believe she is, that our understanding of race is informed by what we hear as much as what

we see, then the function of sound is necessarily both an aesthetic issue and a political one. Other than the race of the performers, what defines the music Baraka speaks of in his collection *Black Music*?

By finding sonority within Baraka's work, I attempt to navigate his constant desire to explore aesthetics and politics. I seek to locate the moments where Baraka pushes himself to move out of one stylistic mode and into another. By doing this, I shed light on the vexing aspects of Baraka's bibliography and potentially locate one reason why he is a difficult writer to understand. If we think of Baraka as primarily a poet — a claim that may appear sensible at first glance considering he published ten book-length collections and his collected works spans over 500 pages — we are able to gain one kind of understanding of Baraka's presence in the American literary canon. In fact, a study of post-war poetics would almost demand some attention to Baraka, who initially sought to position himself in proximity to the poets of Black Mountain (primarily Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Ed Dorn) and the New York School. Then LeRoi Jones, a lunch date with Frank O'Hara is the subject of O'Hara's "Personal Poem" from the 1964 collection *Lunch Poems*. Baraka's first collection *Preface* carries dedications to Charles Olson and Robert Duncan as well as Beat poets Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, and John Wieners. By 1964, when Baraka publishes *The Dead Lecturer*, he has dropped many of these clear associations instead dedicating poems to Willie Best, a black actor in early Hollywood who appeared under the name Sleep n' Eat and often depicted stereotypes of black men, and Robert Williams, a North Carolina NAACP leader who formed a black rifle club to defend against Ku Klux Klan attacks. I evoke these dedications not to overemphasize their ramifications but to offer one way into a question I have wrestled with throughout my study of

Baraka. While making arguments for Baraka's tonal shifts and unceasing innovation, I found myself wondering what could have happened if Baraka had done the opposite. If he had stayed closer to the stylistic centers of his contemporaries, if he had not left Greenwich Village for Harlem and eventually returned to his hometown of Newark, how would we remember Baraka today? It is impossible to come to a satisfactory answer, but we can see how by the mid 1960s Baraka has begun to move beyond the writers he first associates with.

Baraka's embrace of black culture and his burgeoning commitments to racial justice and radical activism underscore the fact that Baraka not only departed from a social milieu, but left a style of poetics for something else. By widening our lens and thinking of Baraka as an activist who wrote poetry, a music critic who wrote plays, etc. we are able to understand Baraka's affiliations while finding reasons to travel out of schools and artistic movements. To be clear, Baraka was not an outcast anymore than he desired to be seen as such. His early poetry collections were well-received, and his *Dutchman* won the Obie Award from *The Village Voice*, veritably signaling his acceptance in the Downtown avant-garde of bohemian New York. The timeline of this project captures a period where Baraka was not only thought of as a vital innovator but had a larger social presence because of his politics. The infamy of Amiri Baraka begins in this period, and his legacy demonstrates the difference between awareness and understanding. During the riots of July 1967, Amiri Baraka was arrested and charged with carrying two unlicensed revolvers and resisting arrest. He was not participating in the riots and initially opposed them, but was arrested while driving through Newark (allegedly by a police officer he went to high school with). During his sentencing, the judge read aloud sections of his poem "Black People!" which had been published that year in the *Evergreen Review*. In the poem,

Baraka writes “Our brothers are moving all over, smashing at jellywhite faces. We must / make our own World, man, our own world, and we can not do this unless the / white man is dead. Let’s get together and kill him my man” (Hahne and Morea 104). Though he would soon be exonerated, the judge’s reading before the juror and the court’s audience created national news, introducing Baraka as a violent writer with violent intentions. Soon after his exoneration, Baraka found a music label named Jihad. Jihad Productions, a short-lived endeavour that produced three LPs, including a staging of Baraka’s afro-futurist morality play “Black Mass” with music by the Sun Ra Myth-Science Arkestra, would only further ostracize some people who only knew Baraka’s name as a pop culture figure.

Baraka held a place in the popular consciousness different from many writers. Not known enough to be considered a “household name,” he nonetheless gained an increasingly large audience following the Newark Riots as he became a voice in the Black Nationalist movement. As his public stature grew, the public understanding of Baraka’s place within black culture and society diminished. Out of this confusion we are able to see the very questions this project seeks to address: How does Baraka navigate the aesthetic missions of a black artist with the agenda of a political activist who increasingly committed himself to community action and leadership? By 1972, this question was on the minds of those in the community who understood that Baraka was a charismatic leader and talented orator, but couldn’t quite place what he was promoting himself as. In an interview with Tony Brown, a journalist who produced the television program *Black Journal*, Brown asks Baraka about his role in the National Black Political Convention recently held in Gary, Indiana. After playing a clip from two years prior where Baraka briefly addresses the crowd on issues of community unity before almost seamlessly segueing into a performance

that hybridizes his poems “It’s Nation Time” and “What’s Gon Happen,” Brown asks Baraka, “That film, more than anything, shows the combination of you as an artist and a politician. Do you consider yourself basically an artist or, now, do you consider yourself basically a politician?” Baraka responds:

I don’t see the division, I think those kinds of divisions are basically artificial. When we were redefining aesthetics from a black point of view one of the points that we tried to make is that there is no division between art and life ... or politics and life. It’s a particular way of defining things at a particular time. ... I don’t see the division between the black politician and the black artist. I think all that energy is necessary and it all needs to be focused in the same direction, that is the creation of a strong, national black community.

In this moment, Baraka is remarkably straight-forward in how he is navigating these fields. As this project frequently turns to passages of Baraka’s writing that are far more opaque, it is worth a pause. While Baraka is emerging as a leader for black artists and activists, he never shirks from his tendency for cosmically romantic language. He is positioning himself as a leader, but rarely tips his hand by using language typical of a politician. Baraka chooses to equivocate, provoking the black community to break through the very same barriers they’re confining him within. Though he doesn’t make this claim as strongly elsewhere, in this interview he appears to position “aesthetics” as an umbrella over both art and politics (and potentially life itself). Recalling the process of redefining aesthetics (and one must acknowledge how Baraka seems to see this redefinition as complete) Baraka reveals his feeling that art is life as politics is life. As this project considers how Baraka is more than poet, more than a critic, we might return to this quote

for clarity. The whole of Baraka is greater than the sum of his parts, and understanding his vision for community as something that supersedes distinction clarifies what he is striving for.

Still, Baraka would not be an interesting person to study if he only declared this sentiment. This project visits diverse textual moments that echo his 1972 sentiments but do not contain the same assuredness. Baraka didn't find comfort in only assertion; he is constantly testing the validity of the division between "politician" and "artist." Even if he finds divisions to be artificial, Baraka dedicates a decade of texts to the question. Baraka pushed this question to its limits, and this project is unable to contain every instance of his work. I concentrate on his music criticism, political writing, and poetry, though a more expansive study would turn to his plays, fiction, and recorded music. I assert that the relationship of aesthetics and politics can be understood through questions of sound, and I believe that this would be true if the field of inquiry could be expanded to include more of Baraka's work. With the exception of his 1982 poem "In the Tradition" this project focuses on Baraka's published work between 1961 and 1971. I believe that this period adequately demonstrates Baraka's rapid progression through various literary communities and his arrival as a respected, if often controversial, leader in the black artistic community. I did not choose *Black Music* over a novel *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965) or the story collection *Tales* (1967) because I find it to reveal much more than these others. Quite the opposite, it is my belief that all three would, upon study, continue to reveal refreshing nuances to the discussion I orient around *Black Music*, *Blues People*, *Home: Social Essays*, *Raise Race Rays Raze*. A study can always be more comprehensive, and these omissions are an issue of time. As this project seeks to work against efforts to classify Baraka within stylistic periods and instead thinks through how works from his earliest poetry, his

Marxist-informed music criticism, and his nationalist political activism can be united by his ongoing struggles to understand the reciprocal relationship of aesthetics and politics. I do this because I believe that Baraka himself didn't think in such periodization, so why should we? The perpetual movement forward, a constant quest for a higher plane of understanding, these were what drove Baraka.

Baraka's work has often been studied in phases and fragments. Scholars have studied Baraka through a temporal / political progression by aligning some works (for example, the collections *Blues People or Dead Lecturer*) with his bohemian phase where he rubbed elbows with the likes of Frank O'Hara and Charles Olson, and others (such as *Raise Race Rays Raze* and *Hard Facts*) with his most vociferous black radical phase. Much has been made of considering Baraka, in the words of E. Ethelbert Miller, as a "geographical poet," dividing his work between his East Village phase, his time in Harlem, and his move to Newark in 1966. This method, it should be noted, has come retrospectively. As early as 1960, anthologist Donald Allen actually placed Baraka *outside* of geographical distinctions of contemporary poetry. His *New American Poetry: 1945-1960* is organized in five sections by movement or place. The first four are, in order, poets of the Black Mountain College of North Carolina, the San Francisco Renaissance poets (including Jack Spicer and Lawrence Ferlinghetti), the Beat Generation writers such as Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac, and the New York School poets. The final group, which Allen places Baraka in, "has no geographical definition; it includes younger poets who have been associated with and in some cases influenced by the leading writers of the preceding groups, but who have evolved their own original styles and new conceptions of poetry" (Allen xii-xiii). Even prior to the publication of his first full collection of poems, Donald Allen recognized Baraka's

unique place in American poetry; his fondness for the Black Mountain architects such as Olson and Duncan, his social identity within the jazz hipster subculture frequently by Beats like Kerouac and Ginsberg, and his geographical overlap with the New York writers.

There are positives and negatives to these phasal and spatial methods of study. On the one hand, it makes sense and it is “easier” (for the scholar) to draft such organizational schematics. This project, in part, uses a similar method simply to try and handle the sheer amount of work (essays, plays, novels, poems, music) that Baraka published. Though this project focuses on the 1960s and early 1970s, I do not remain isolated in this period. Studying works published during these years, I choose to study them in a spirit of flux and of change. My reading of Baraka goes far outside this period, looking at both past and future and attempting to make sense of the antecedents and consequences of the climate in which Baraka worked. It would be foolish to think that the retrospective periodization of his work by scholars was what Baraka had in mind. Speaking with poet E. Ethelbert Miller in 1998, a sixty-four year old Amiri Baraka reflects on his relationship to American readers and to the African American community specifically. Baraka says, “People are concerned with what changes their lives, what moves them. Now I might be known by a circle of literary lights *et cetera, et cetera*, but in terms of the broad masses of the people, I think they know me because I have been not only a writer, but principally because I have been a voice in the movement ... among many other voices” (“Amiri Baraka on His Poetry and Breaking the Rules”). Baraka may mean to suggest that one can not study his literary pursuits without attending to and taking seriously his political activism. Even if he said one thing in 1964 and said the opposite point in 1971, we as scholars would be wrong to consider this about-face as nothing more than a contradiction. In the truest sense of the world,

Baraka brought a revolutionary philosophy to his writing, to his politics, and to his life that not only welcomed change, but thrived off of it.

This project hopes to answer how Amiri Baraka sought to describe the world he heard in the things he wrote. I posit that Baraka's work values the heard as much or more than it values what is seen. It claims that there is an implicit emphasis on sonority — whether it be chants in the street or notes from a horn — that encodes sound not only as something worth reading about, but as a mode of identity-making that is deeply tied to traditions of African American culture. By filling his work with these sonic examples, and willfully demonstrating their influence on his artistic voice, Baraka's writing comes to host a multitude of African American artistic practices, musical, poetic, and otherwise. The primary point of departure in this writing has been to locate and explore the moment in Baraka's writing where he underwent a major tonal shift. This tonal pivot marks a change away from the poetic voice of his early work, akin to his contemporaries Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and others of the New York School, towards a vernacular performative tone. Here, I define vernacularity as being a sonorous issue, culturally and racially specific in its linguistic inversions and neologisms. While Baraka undertakes the presentation of vernacular voice in text, I believe that vernacularity necessitates the considerations of vocality. Vernacular language, especially that which is presented in text as an embodiment of a style of speech, presents verbal inversions of language in text. I associate an increased vernacular presence with Baraka's expanding emphasis on black consciousness, wherein writing as one talks is understood to be a sensuous expression that allows black vernacular english, singing patterns of African American performers, and slang to inhabit the textual plane.

In my first chapter, I begin to look at Amiri Baraka's relationship(s) to Black America, paying particular attention to his writing on jazz music in the middle 1960s. Focusing on *Black Music* (1968), I offer a reading of Baraka's criticism that revolves around questions of tradition and of process. Within this study, "tradition" and "process" connote several things; cultural inheritance, artistic practice, the passing of time, assumed or cultivated legacies, ways to deal with the world. In a later chapter, I return to *Black Music* and the question of process to argue for a reading of Baraka's criticism of free jazz as a mimetic cultural practice, suggesting that Baraka's critical project was only interested in promoting free jazz, but in adapting its aesthetic peculiarities to his own work. Moving beyond Baraka's writing, this chapter investigates these questions of time, tradition, composition, and inheritance through the work of philosophers Henri Bergson and William James, attempting to read Bergson's theory of Duration and James's thoughts on the Pragmatic Method into Baraka's cultural criticism and poetry. Within this discussion of process and time, I turn briefly to Gertrude Stein's seminal essay "Composition as Explanation." At this moment, I am moving out of Bergson's conception of nonlinear time, placing Baraka's 1982 poem "In the Tradition" somewhere between Bergson and Stein to suggest a philosophical kinship between these thinkers. Baraka, who often spoke negatively about a broad spectrum of white writers, has not often been studied in terms of philosophical and aesthetic counterparts or antecedents, so I hope this reading may offer new depth to his developing life philosophy.<sup>1</sup> This chapter concludes by moving from James's writing on philosophical Truth towards a vernacular examination of truth. To do this, I rely heavily on Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology and Afro American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception to this omission is William J Harris's *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka* (1985), where he offers several readings of Baraka's aesthetic disposition through the essays of T.S. Eliot.

on Baraka's *Home: Social Essays* (1966) and his *Tales* (1967). The connection, from James to the blues, seeks to adapt the ethos of applicability and "real-life" know-how often associated with Pragmatism and apply it to Baraka's celebration of distinctly African American sonic cultural practices.

The most obvious place to study Baraka's textual relationship to sonic practices should be his jazz criticism. Prioritizing his work in *Blues People* (1963), my second chapter begins by surveying the field of jazz criticism in the 1960s. In doing so, I show the trends in jazz writing of the period, demonstrating variations Baraka took on popular critical viewpoints while drawing attention to the facets of Baraka's writing that make him stand out as a notable critic of the period. Beginning with the work of Frank Kofsky, a Marxist critic and academic, I contextualize debates over the burgeoning free jazz sound and movement within larger discussions of race and class politics in the music industry. The bulk of the chapter is dedicated to discussing Baraka in the context of Albert Murray, another major figure in music criticism as well as in black cultural criticism generally. Each writer dedicates significant energy to understanding the relationship of jazz and blues music to what it means to be "American," as each finds ways in which a democratic ethos is cultivated in jazz performance. Seemingly landing on opposite sides of the cultural avant-garde, I argue that Baraka and Murray actually exhibit critical overlaps in thought. This chapter builds on the nuances of tradition and cultural inheritance introduced in the first chapter. Moving out of the world of philosophy and composition, the study of *Blues People* in the context of Murray's *Stomping the Blues* and his later interviews reinvigorates these arguments in a primarily musical context.

Baraka's oeuvre suggests that the Newark riots of July 1967, where Newark's minority communities rebelled against the racist police force and City officials after the arrest and beating of cab driver John Smith, were a catalyst for his tonal shift. His return to Newark only a year prior, renouncing his previous name, LeRoi Jones, and his own arrest on fabricated charges during the riots all seem to affect the change of writing style. This new style features prominently in *Raise Race Rays Raze*, where Baraka writes on popular culture and political activism in Newark, while flooding his essays with slang, ellisions and abbreviations, and non linguistic symbols such as Egyptian hieroglyphs to suggest an urgent energy that reaches far past the limitations of language. I approach the history of the Newark riots seeking to understand how Baraka understood their repercussions, and to see how his written compositions may demonstrate an attention to sound in their framing of the events. Studying Baraka's essays in conjunction with news coverage published in *Time* as well as government documents released later, I attempt a reading that suggests each of these vastly different sources — the Congress of the United States, Amiri Baraka, and *Time* journalists — each exhibited a vested interest in how the riots may have sounded. Though at times openly opposed to and resentful of one another, writings from each focus on gunshots, chants, and spoken rumors such that these sources become linked by a hitherto unremarked sonic emphasis.

Each of these three sections places significant weight on forms of sonority, whether they be vocal, verbal, sung, or played. Processes of ekphrastic writing, improvisation, and composition remain under investigation throughout these chapters, seeking to demonstrate Baraka's aesthetic priorities and subject matter simultaneously. The events of Newark turn away from music towards a different kind of sound, that of gunfire and political protest. In this case,

the sounds are almost fully imagined and (re)constructed in text, as the purpose is to demonstrate Baraka's sonorous world-making. By orienting the project around these two groupings of sound, it grants the ability to do cogent work with Baraka's various "phases." Elevating sound to a primary position in a way akin to how I argue Baraka does, I feel able to work outside of the constrictions of chronology and genre that may hinder a comprehensive study of Amiri Baraka's work.

## Chapter One

### “We are Bodies Responding Different”: Amiri’s Blues for the West

The many phases and developments of Baraka’s literary identity and political persona have caused his career to be studied in fragments. At its most *gestalt* formation, Baraka’s career in the mid 1960s and early 1970s is tripartite: Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) as Greenwich Village bohemian, Baraka as black nationalist, Baraka as third-world revolutionary Marxist. Rather than cement these retroactively assumed phasal differences, I want to investigate the parallel and perpendicular relationships Baraka takes with the jazz musicians of the 1960s. This will engage his jazz criticism — his most explicit connection with the music — as well as work to demonstrate how jazz’s emphasis on spontaneous exploration as declarative statement may affect what Nathaniel Mackey has called Baraka’s “openness not only to change but to about-faces of the most explosive kind” (*Discrepant Engagement* 22).

I would like to begin by explaining why Amiri Baraka gravitated towards free jazz in the way that he did. Free jazz, a style of performance popularized by musicians such as Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago among others, pushed the music forward by returning to a distinctly African-American method of participation and group think. Beginning in the early 1960s (“Free jazz” is first coined for Coleman’s 1961 album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*) this style of performance reached a zenith in the late 1960s prior to the explosion of divergent avant-garde American musics that dabbled in rock and soul with a heavy emphasis on electronic technologies. Through Baraka’s prose, the political, artistic, and historical implications of free jazz are both validated and expanded.

Collective improvisation, Baraka writes in “The Changing Same,” “is where our music was when we arrived on these shores, a collective expression” (*BM* 194). The turn away from jazz traditions of soloing endemic to bebop and swing, wherein each member of the ensemble is given an opportunity to showcase their individual ability, represented a concerted attack on Western traditions, social and musical. In “The Changing Same,” Baraka chooses to invoke the voice of the “West-oriented, the whiteened” critic who calls collective improvisation “chaos” (*BM* 195). This willingness to disturb, to appropriate critical language as self-identity and to both hear and sound chaotically, always runs directly in tension with what Baraka perceives as Western ethics. The embrace of the collective emerges as a new avenue for the development of the self within a larger context. This “context” appears and reappears in his music criticism and his emergent black nationalist writing of the same period, though in different forms. It is always contra teleology; the historical understanding of the moment one is in that imaginatively moves from past to future, Africa to America, seamlessly. It is how Baraka can write, within the same period, of Cecil Taylor’s music as a “breaking away from old American forms. Toward new American forms” while also stating “Merica is to die, soon. All good men want it to fall” (*BM* 197, *Raise Race Rays Raze* 18).<sup>2</sup> In the distinction between new and old, and between these and “Merica,” Baraka finds a way to navigate between time periods, tracking a developing style while simultaneously maintaining a desire to combat entrenched racism and oppression. Perhaps the new American form Cecil Taylor embodies is the very same “fall” Baraka delights in later. These aren’t distinctly different from one another, but represent a field of study that is constantly

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<sup>2</sup> *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965* will further be abbreviated to *RR*. See Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*.

shifting, whose changes both affect its participants and remains moldable for an artist like Baraka.

Baraka maintains a troubled and diverse relationship with the language of “America/n” around the period of his nascent ethnonationalism. After Mackey, we should understand the contrary statements above as being two parts of the “open” whole that Baraka is trying to cultivate at this time. Remaining with “The Changing Same” and “Poetry and Karma,” an essay that was published six years later but was probably composed within two years of the compared work, Baraka seems clear in his means of disturbance if still opaque in his ends. Both essays meditate on the turn from the head to the heart, from “intellectual” to “emotional,” as a means of furthering one's understanding of their surroundings. This is not to place an assumed polarity between the connotative differences between “head” and “heart,” but to underscore Baraka’s desire to break from what he viewed as a cold or tepid kind of intellectualism. Jazz music, the secular voice of “The Changing Same” that is drenched in religious antecedents, is “pushed by an emotionalism that seeks freedom” (*BM* 195). Improvisation, then, unseats the hierarchy of the mind and the intellect that composition necessitates. In the clear connection of emotionalism to freedom, improvisation must desire personal and political freedom while simultaneously attaining and declaring it.

Baraka expands upon what freedom can mean for those who are seeking it by playing or listening to music. Quickly, his definitions slip out of the present, moving through time in both directions at once to arrive at a capacious understanding of one’s moment in history as something relational, sonically and otherwise, with what has come before and what will come (again) later. “We can use the past as shrines of our suffering, as a poeticizing beyond what we

think of the present (the “actual”) has to offer. But that *is* true in the sense that any clear present must include as much of the past as it needs to clearly illuminate it” (*BM* 196).

Baraka’s parenthetical quoting of what is “actual” in life points to another critique of Western reason. It is awkward to assert within a critical study of an intellectual of Baraka’s talents, but in “The Changing Same” and “Poetry and Karma” he is attempting to work against ratiocinative approaches to criticism, thus disturbing the larger project of Criticism from within. Occasionally this disturbance occurs on the level of language, where Baraka will break grammatical and/or spelling conventions (see his ubiquitous use of abbreviations such as “cd” for “could” or “tho” for “though”). Writing on the disparities in American poetics on racial lines, Baraka writes:

Poetry the mode of thought trying to spiritualize itself. Sound-rhythm (image) in imitation of the elementals of the universe. So it digs deeper, goes to, beyond, the edge of ‘meaning’ recreates language feeling, to bring us closer to these elementals, beyond where the ‘intellect’ reaches (*RR* 22).

To unpack the work of Baraka’s critique, one must first notice the performance of the critique at hand. The grammatical slippages and the difficulty the reader *must* have in handling this passage are intentional, as they mimetically engage with the critique Baraka is laying out. It is a textual performance that emulates the performance of free jazz by maintaining a similar engagement of mind and heart as choreographed in *Black Music*. It is an “intellectual” statement that breaks the rules of reason that dictate the validity and/or the correctness of verbal and written expression (grammar) but remains unflinchingly robust in its understanding of (and potentially as) poetry. As in “The Changing Same” where Baraka stresses the connection of improvisational ability

with emotional capacity, his desire to locate the place where “intellect” (read: Western reason) can not reside is to declare the validity of emotive criticism while demonstrating its practice.

Baraka pored over the use-value of and social implications for jazz improvisation. The improvising musician balances composition and artistic completion simultaneously, as improvisation represents the erasure of composition as the desired product while being composition’s greatest tool. Improvisation serves as an extension of chance, and is therefore wholly natural for Baraka. It is a turn away from philosophies of training and technique for something new. “Usually a man playing Bach is only demonstrating his music lessons ... But nothing that already exists is *that* valuable. The most valuable quality in life is the will to existence” (*Home: Social Essays* 198-199). Baraka tacitly averts the fact that jazz improvisation is something that must be practiced and, as Travis Jackson and Salim Washington have shown, that bebop remains a musical language with cues, norms of phrasing, cadence, and accent like any other language. This omission demonstrates what Mackey has called Baraka’s “exaltation of process” which places him within a tradition that emphasizes constant renewal (*Discrepant Engagement* 32). As we will see time and again in Baraka’s work, the choice of aligning his philosophies with, or against, a movement or tradition is highly intentional and often linked to anxieties over popular culture and intellectual history.

Baraka uses the discussion of process to push against the West. “Hunting is Not Those Heads on the Wall,” written in 1964, sees Baraka unpacking distinctions in art-making between “process” and “artifact.” He demonstrates the fallacies of understanding art in a way that divides process from the resultant object, arguing for a twain of form (“*how* a thing exists”) and content (“*why* a thing exists”) that would push art analysis into the “natural” or organic world to engage

art objects as things of use (*Home* 200-201). His elevation of process in “Hunting is Not Those Heads on the Wall” as elsewhere should be understood as a concept neatly tied to musical improvisation. His formulation of the social utility of improvisation as a method of living, of thinking, and as practice occurs in his critical writing on music but carries through his other work as the exaltation of process morphs and evolves across projects. Writing on the music of Sun Ra, Baraka says that “it is evolution itself, and its fruits. God as evolution. The flow of *is*. So the future revealed is man explained to himself. The travel through inner space as well as outer ... But the content of The New Music, or The New Black Music, is toward change. It is change” (*BM* 199).

## What *Is* Was: A Few Histories of Time

I want to explore the limits of Baraka's "flow" to understand how and what the temporal present looks like in his work. The passage quoted above comes from "The Changing Same," and it is the work that most explicitly outlines his arguments for jazz music containing multiples and magnitudes of past and future. The work of understanding and expanding Baraka's present ties directly to the ongoing study of process, and I will attempt to read Baraka's use of "present" and "process" through the language of Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation" and Henri Bergson's *Time and Free Will*. Both works attempt to display a practice of time that works against assumptions of temporal progression — the unfolding of events in a logical order that honors time as the ultimate mode of ordering — to demarcate time as a personal (that is, navigable) tool. Stein's "continuous present" and Bergson's concept of simultaneity should engage with Baraka's "changing same" concept of the racial imaginary wherein he can claim, through heritage or "tradition," a kinship with the past that (re)occurs in the present. It is the same construction of time that allows James Baldwin to state, in "The Discovery of What It Means to be an American," "the fact that I was the son of a slave" (*Nobody Knows My Name* 18). Four years later, Baldwin would voice this idea again in the Oxford debate with William F Buckley, saying: "...this is not an overstatement: *I* picked the cotton, *I* carried it to market, *I* built the railroads under someone else's whip for nothing. For nothing" (Riverbends Channel 2012). I evoke Baldwin to draw a parallel between his ethos of temporality at this time and Baraka's. Though the two writers carried out a dramatic tension at this time, they seem to have been connected by this elision of time based on the history of American racism.

Baraka's *In the Tradition* (1982) underscores connections between his work and that of Stein and Bergson. In the poem, Baraka stakes his claim of being "In the tradition of / all of us, in an unending everywhere at the same time / line / in motion forever" (*SOS* 213). It is this language of lines dictating a space and direction to time that interests Bergson, who works to complicate claims of continuity by arguing for an understanding of time that is personal and that can not be understood totally under the auspices of scientific deductive reasoning. Bergson's theory of Duration insists on the projection of time, here defined as one's personal ordering of events and their inability to distinguish progression, allows for the tendency to speak spatially of time such that modes of temporal order are made void. From "Duration, Succession, and Space":

We set our states of consciousness side by side in such a way as to perceive them simultaneously, no longer in one another, but alongside one another; in a word, we project time into space, we express duration in terms of extensity, and succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another. Note that the mental image thus shaped implies the perception, no longer successive, but simultaneous, of a *before* and *after*, and that it would be a contradiction to suppose a succession which was only a succession, and which nevertheless was contained in one and the same instant (Bergson 101).

Even while creating this projection of time delineated through an imagined space, Bergson's mental image eliminates succession. This mode of simultaneity works because, as Bergson states later, "in order to perceive a line as a line, it is necessary to take up a position outside it" (103). The line begins to work more as a harbor than as a device for order. Before and after exist as one in a planar dynamic as events "interconnect" through one another rather than stand as demarcated parts of a larger whole (101). Baraka's enjambment of "time / line" aligns with Bergson in this way. The effect emulates Bergson's portrayal of the line in or through space, and

his dialectical argument for the overlapping of events. As it is constant, one event placed near another on his line must interact as they are paired, thus rendering senseless the language of order. Baraka's infinite language — "everywhere," "unending," "forever" — moves with and pushes beyond Bergson's idea of magnitude and extensity, which maintains that when something is deemed more intense or of a greater magnitude than something else, it must necessarily pass through and consume that which is deemed lesser (3). Everything occurring on top of everything else in time means that there can no longer be a past or a future but simply the present. We have arrived again at the "flow of *is*."

To understand what Bergson may be doing with his conception of a line through space, we have to understand his three dimensional design of the line. In the mental image, there is distance of the line that cuts through the voided space, the occurrence and plotting of things onto the line. The line must extend in both directions, but does so without indicating temporal order. As Bergson makes clear, it is the act of plotting on the line at all that proves the plotter's understanding of space, and therefore presupposes any possible declaration of temporality (102). Space moves around the line and the line moves through space as each exists in collaboration with the other. The time / line of tradition can be understood as both the line and the space. The assertion of the time / line "in motion forever" is as if to say that time is suspended ad infinitum so as to be timeless. Time less, and still in space. The tradition that Baraka places himself within jumps gaps of time, as it is plotted on the line without regard for order. Still, his tradition remains temporally active in spite of its disregard for time. The tradition is "always clarifying, always new and centuries old" (*SOS* 217).

In his theory of Pure Duration, Bergson uses the example of the pendulum to understand the personal ways to engage with time through its physical manifestations. His heuristic uses oscillations of the pendulum, but we can supplant this with markers Baraka names, say Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Arthur Blythe. Bergson asserts that the problem of observing time pass with the pendulum is that, when one oscillation of the pendulum is completed, we are forced to deny the recollection of every past oscillation because space allows no method for preservation. If one thinks of these events as simultaneous, they are free to “perceive one in the other, each permeating the other and organizing themselves like the notes of a tune” to form a “continuous or qualitative multiplicity” (105). The plotting of pendulum swings, like the claiming of Kareem’s hook shot and Blythe’s alto sax, can and must happen on top of one another. As the essence of the pendulum’s oscillation has changed in Bergson’s multiplicity, the meanings of the lives, the sights, smells, and sounds Baraka names change once they’re placed on the line and in the simultaneity of tradition.

Qualitative multiplicity, changing same, flow of *is*; the present has emerged as an ever expanding, simmering stew. Still, how does this come to bear on Baraka’s approach to process? How does this get us to an understanding of the present that can be utilized to arrive at a deeper reading of Baraka? Stein’s embrace of a “continuous present” brings questions of duration and of simultaneity back to the realm of composition. “Composition as Explanation” works in ways similar to Bergson’s idea of duration, but differs in its treatments and uses of time for the composition. The concept of prolonging the present works, for Stein, as a “natural” process that disregards past and future. To achieve this, she had to “[grope] for a continuous present and [use] everything by beginning again and again and again” (Stein 3). What emerges out of this struggle

is an understanding of three-dimensional time that plays with space in a way akin to Bergson. Stein's claim is that "everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition" (Stein 2). She argues that this triad — "time and" / "time of" / "time in" — flows from the existence of the composition, calling each a "natural phenomena" of the composition.

The composition, for Stein, is capable of simultaneously creating, consuming, and containing time. Time is like the breath of life for composition: unconsciously present but literally vital for the composition's function. The emphasis placed on the time of and time in a composition calls for a reading of Stein's continuous present that recognizes the importance of the time of composition — the temporal tracking of a composition's life within a larger history — while allowing for a reversal in understanding. Composition of time, composition as time. Though the concept of "continuous present" may be understood as an idea about how time acts on composition, it is worth considering how composition engages time. For Baraka, composition as improvisation and/or live performance suspends time, as the listener is subject to the performer's manipulation of the performance space. When viewing the musician, the listener/viewer is a participant in the musical project at hand, giving themselves to the performer's work. Time is suspended in the sense that it no longer becomes a tool of organization — that is, a method of tracking how a person spends a day — but is controlled by the performer to wield as they choose. The listener is at the mercy of the performer, and their concentration is temporarily held in the space of the performance. The performance takes time and subverts it, rending time further away from its position as an impartial, objective measurement. The performer is able to wield time and to subject the listener to their own

explorations. If faithful to this subjective temporal marker, the performer becomes the time signature.

Time is social as much as it is personal, and improvisation is a composition of time that is time's deconstruction. A free act is defined by Bergson as being unique from "the state from which it issued," and therefore unable to be recreated. Though each free act emerges from a specific set of circumstances, the act is a fleeting object that shreds any conception of determinism (Bergson 239). In "Hunting is not those heads on the wall," Baraka frames art as an alternative way of tracking time that is perpetually new. Testing the limits of language, Baraka imagines the verb and the present participle as being the tools to construct an unfixed present that constantly renews itself. From "Heads...":

The clearest description of now is the present participle, which if the activity described continues is always correct ... Be-ing, the most complex, since it goes on as itself, as adjective-verb, and at the moment of. Art is not a being, but a Being, the simple noun. It is not the verb, but its product. Worship the verb, if you need something. Then even God is after the fact, since He is the leavings of God-ing. The verb-God, is where it is, the container of all possibility. Art, like time, is the measurement of. Make no mistake (*Home* 199).

Let us return to "The Changing Same." Bergson and Stein's works serve as comparative studies on ideas of composition and time, but they must be brought to bear on Baraka's ideas. Process and product, form and content, a people and their music; all of these dyads fill Baraka's work as he argues that cultural flourishing as cultural survival occurs because of and in direct response to a crisis of memory. Like his choice to appropriate the language of musical "chaos," Baraka unpacks the violence and erasure of slavery using the language of oppression, saying that "a 'cultureless' people is a people without a memory. No history" (*BM* 182). To survive this,

memory must become multifaceted and constant. Not simply recollection but recreation.

Understanding what he calls “the Blues (impulse) lyric (song)” is an act of survival that is both cultural and personal. This declaration of personhood sees memory becoming a sensory process, and “authenticity” is read with deadly intent:

Identification is Sound Identification is Sight Identification is Touch,  
Feeling, Smell, Movement. (For instance, I can tell, even in the shadows,  
halfway across the field, whether it is a white man or Black man running  
... He could not initiate that style. It is no description, it *is* the culture  
(*BM* 184).

Memory is constantly renewed as musical memory is tactile, aural, oral, neural. This is because, as Baraka asserts, “*the song and the people is the same*” (*BM* 187). Baraka’s own work should prove this. Blues musical traditions aren’t something he draws on in the sense of available technique. It is not just a motif he has at his disposal. The engagement of musical tradition is constant, progressive and in flux as much as the person / people who created it. As much as it has been shaped by tradition, that tradition has shaped the people. “What are the people, for the most part, singing about?” Baraka asks. “Their lives ... the songs, the music, changed, as the people did” (*BM* 189).

The tension between infinity and temporal fixedness of “In the Tradition” exemplifies this progression. It is a movement through time that values a nonnormative progression; progress without cultural amnesia. (This “nonnormative progression” should be understood as different, in means as well as ends, from ideas of progress and development that focused on the white nuclear family. Cultural amnesia would be to engage in “whitening” through the cultivation of a black middle class. Baraka returns again and again to this idea, most notably in *Blues People*, where he says that the black middle class “thought that the best way for the black man to survive was to

cease being black” (*Blues People* 124).) Treating history not as the distant past but the constantly renewing present must be the function of tradition. It is a tradition that renews itself. Each evocation of African American tradition, from Malcolm X to swung sixteenth notes, can be understood as loci plotted on the spiraling, looping time / line that remains “in motion forever” (*SOS* 213). This image is not unlike Stein’s declaration that “beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series” (Stein 2). Repetition need not be tautological, as the present of process is overwhelmed with histories. Baraka’s present denies linear temporality because with each cultural exclamation (which is the declaration of existence) one must evoke the past and envisage the future. Baraka writes:

‘I got to laugh to keep from cryin,’ which The Miracles make, ‘I got to dance to keep from cryin,’ is not only a song but the culture itself. It is finally the same cry, the same people. You really got a hold on me. As old as our breath here (*BM* 190).

## Philosophic Tradition(s) and Vernacular Mediation

Baraka's critical voice sought to move away from the arms-length style of empiricist investigation, desiring to find a more sensuous mode of criticism. He wanted to project a voice that mattered because it clearly and definitely cared about the subject at hand. His "critical" texts of the 1960s and early 1970s, including *Blues People*, *Black Music*, *Home: Social Essays*, and *Raise Race Rays Raze*, each project an assault on whiteness and class complacency. Baraka's critique of "middlebrow" and middle class white America carries over and through his writing, assuming various positions within a matrix of music, race, and economics. This matrix of subjects overflows across distinctions of public and private, personal and objective. It is Baraka's ability to write the personal into the political, and vice versa, that poet Harmony Holiday calls, "humbly honest at the expense of glamour — until the sheer truth becomes glamorous" ("On Amiri Baraka" 175). The "sheer truth" was not only that the economic and social are tied to one another, but that socioeconomic factors — Red Lining, segregation, funding for public education, etc. — are consciously manipulated by some with political power to benefit white, affluent communities at the cost of exploiting black Americans. Baraka argued this, and more, through these essays. It is imperative to understand the personal stakes of this truth, and how Baraka's personal voice and personhood act as a grounding for criticism and as a critique themselves. I want to track, in Holiday's words, "[Baraka's] ability to render the political and poetic reciprocal by way of the deeply and often unflatteringly personal" (175). In his poetry as in his politics, Baraka laid his emotions bare, revealing an insatiable inner life that fed on his passions. The personal forces within criticism are in no way unique to or begin with Amiri

Baraka. What is striking about his critical project is how his humanity is at the crux of the criticism. Not a ghost of the text, but something of a constant declaration of intention and vitality. It may be useful to think of Baraka's numerous shifts in approach and style as being in concert with the stakes of being a black writer in this country at that particular moment. The stakes of his critical voice were, literally, akin to the stakes of being alive. As Baraka stated in a later interview: "People want to know why I've changed so much. Hey, I'm alive. That's all" (Feinstein 21).

The practice of practicality takes varying forms in critical movements. Drawing attention to these differences makes clear the singularity of a writer or a movement's desires and needs in composing philosophies of application, demonstrating the polymorphous tradition these writings may unwittingly find themselves extending. Practicality, as a footing for criticism, risks positing an institutional or societal critique that, by way of its uncontainably vast implications, may in turn reify the very social mores it seeks to critique. Amiri Baraka's criticism, at times composed like a diss track of 20th century literary and philosophical trends, seems to want a complete dissociation with the white socio-historical past. From "Mwalimu Texts (from Book of Life pt 2)": "We are citizens of the world, earth men, striving for a new order ... We are for world progress. So much so that we would begin with ourselves, in order that we are clearly in tune with the move of world spirit for birth, new vision, as constant change" (*RR* 165) But what if constant change is a tradition in itself? If we are to form a tradition of anti-tradition, what happens? Without the advent of a metric for success and failure, I want to continue to move across the 20th century towards Baraka's writing to understand how attempts to eschew imagined tradition(s) created antecedents for Baraka's own tradition-bucking.

Criticism is imagined as a tool for something immediate or “useful” if and only if its utility is demonstrable. The stakes of one’s claim must be pressing and evident. We may call this a radical practicality, and in the 20th century it finds a home in the writings of William James. James’s Pragmatism carried with it an ethos of practicality, in which the importance of meeting needs exceeded all else. If something could be discerned, let it be known in simplest terms and by way of simple observation. James’s philosophy, founded on *a posteriori* utility, sought to bring together the physical sciences with the emerging social sciences at the turn of the 20th century. This mission would eventually emanate outward to engage diverse other philosophies of James’s contemporaries and to influence writers in various fields and practices, including Henri Bergson and Gertrude Stein.

In *Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), James writes frequently of “cash-value” to measure, by degrees, the use of an idea or word’s capacity for doing work. “What Pragmatism Means” sees James laying out a philosophy of work, a constant quest for knowledge and understanding that doesn’t find its end in an abstraction from reality or from a nauseatingly complicated philosophical idea but in the next iteration of experiential reality. “You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work” (28). Pragmatism is a method of investigation and a recipe for living wherein the practitioner may harness philosophy as a tool to assist in daily life. As James’s title suggests, Pragmatism is imagined as a step forward in philosophical approach by “[harmonizing] with many philosophic tendencies” (28-29).

“What Pragmatism Means” positions itself in opposition to dominant philosophical trends that James saw as being unnecessarily apart from the consequences of life. Theory must become streamlined if it is to be used to posit a conception of truth. James goes as far as calling his method “anti-intellectual” in its adverse position to rationalism, an epistemological tenet against which Pragmatism is “fully armed and militant” (29). The roles of truth and reinvention are vital and ever-present in James’s writing. “New truth” is what motivates Pragmatism to constantly challenge itself and the traditions it is pushing against. Though interested in upsetting the dominant position occupied by rationalism, James only goes so far, writing that the goal of Pragmatism is to “[marry] old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity” (31). There is a tension in James’s idea of continuity. Not unlike Baraka’s conception of continuity and tradition as the elision of black history from pre-17th century African communal traditions to the black urban cultures of the 20th century, James seeks to find “continuity” between contemporary thinking and what he calls the “older truths.” The influence of these truths, which remain unnamed, is “absolutely controlling. Loyalty to them is the first principle — in most cases it is the only principle” (31).

Between loyalty and continuity, however, lies the emergence of rationalism. James sees this method of investigation as an erroneous vehicle for reaching metaphysical solutions that end in “magic words” as answers to life’s “enigmas” (28). The methods of Pragmatism eschew language as being the ends of metaphysical investigation, choosing instead “the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality of truth” (28). James believes it correct to disregard or turn away from the present path of *a priori* reasoning, arguing instead for a return to the “old ways” of doing philosophy. The proto-philosophical

longing of “What is Pragmatism” begs for a temporal disruption that brings into relief the doubled vision of James. The implied question of James’s argument, that James answers with a resounding positive, is, Is the tradition extended when one denies the predominant method of philosophy (rationalism) and offers instead a fusing of the “new” and “old” truths? *Pragmatism*, as James’s own preface suggests, exists as a catch-all of ideas that have been naturally permuting and coalescing. His mission is to show how all of these ideas aren’t new, but that when unified emerge as something oppositional to contemporary discursive practice. “A number of tendencies *that have always existed* in philosophy have all at once become conscious of themselves collectively, and of their combined mission ... I have sought to unify the picture as it presents itself to my own eyes, dealing in broad strokes” (3) (My emphasis). James positions himself not only as a thinker or as propagator, but as a kind of intellectual curator. *Pragmatism* presents itself as the distillation of ideas, seemingly plucked out of the ether, that James has been able to discern and place in communication with one another in such a way that resulted in the Pragmatic method. Again there is a tension between this deep intellectual history James is imagining and this spontaneous, perhaps improvised, coming to consciousness. The confluence of ideas becoming self-conscious “all at once” motivates James to enact this unification.

“Tradition,” as it is normally employed, seems to imply a temporal continuity that carries over into the  $n+1$  vision of knowledge-production where an idea is projected to another person who responds and adds, playing their role in the directional extension of an intellectual project. James, by preaching the importance of adhering to core, foundational principles, both enacts and disturbs this mode of tradition. Pragmatism, with its break with the near-past while returning to and inherently altering the ideas of the deeper past, exercises both fission and fusion. It is

important to note the personal and physical language James leans on in his preface. This mosaic of ideas, past and present, is only one permutation that presented itself “to [his] own eyes” (3). This move demonstrates the personal singularity of James’s Pragmatism, as he is forming a kind of anti-traditionalist tradition by cutting part from the whole of the past, reconstituting a history that better serves his goals. This is similar to what Houston Baker, in his *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, has called the “rigidly personalized forms” of the blues (Baker 5). Baker views the traditions of blues music as both a “matrix” and as a “phylogenetic recapitulation — a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential mediation ... of species experience” (5). Blues traditions, and it is crucial to note the plurality of this idea, maintain a spatial-temporal-intellectual capacity that can host varying voices and notions that Baker calls a “festival of meaning” (5). This tradition invites tension as it offers a space in which oppositions can be mediated if it is desired. While Baker focuses this “festival” in the blues tradition, it extends through black artistic traditions to encompass, among others, Amiri Baraka. It is a tradition that facilitates conflict and allows for resolution through humorous self-investigation and/or anxious longing. Baker demonstrates the capaciousness of tradition through numerous quotes of popular blues lyrics that highlight ironies of struggle and humor, but to offer a modern line, listen to Kendrick Lamar’s “Humble”: “I don’t fabricate it, ay, most of y’all be fakin’, ay / I stay modest ‘bout it, ay, she elaborate it, ay / This that Grey Poupon, that Evian, that TED Talk, ay / Watch my soul speak, you let the meds talk” (Lamar “Humble”). Lamar’s lines, recorded for his album *DAMN.* (2017) exude a tired confidence from years of celebrity while warning the listener to “sit down ... be humble.” Lamar’s conjuring of a modest self embodies a “starter pack” of liberal, middle class tropes; Evian water, “a product of nature”

(Evian *About Us*), french mustard, and the platform for digital clips of surface-level public intellectualism that seeks to attract “curious souls” with “the power of ideas” that can change the world (TED *Our Organization*). “Humble” is a cultural critique which, by the process of embodying these tropes through “this that,” is then turned into a self-deprecating lampoon on the process of commodification that celebrity enacts. I invoke Lamar here to demonstrate the “productive transit” of blues traditions, as Lamar plays with 21st century consumer culture and celebrity in a way reminiscent of early blues lyrics even if the contexts of these producers are wholly different. His work is just one example that extends traditions through the variable expanse of blues themes such as longing, isolation, and ironic satisfaction. It is the old truth stored within the new of each recapitulation.

Musical tradition differs from philosophy in obvious ways, but Amiri Baraka’s borrowing from both arrives at a new, highly imaginary space within which text, sound, and memory are mediated. While Baraka’s criticism is in no way a perfect reconciliation of the blues and William James, we might see Baraka’s Blues trading a few riffs with the Pragmatists. Though it seems self-evidently flawed, James’s vision of Pragmatism as the synthesis of numerous historical philosophical strains demonstrates a view of tradition that works to smooth the edges of ideas. While the blues is the “mediational site” where tensions are handled with the intent of reaching “adequate cultural understanding” (6), Pragmatism diverts ideas while they are simultaneously coming into themselves, funneling one into the other in hopes of imagining an amalgam of the social and the scientific. James’s essay “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth” seeks to define what truth may mean for the Pragmatic method. Truth, its uses and constructions, is the vital end

towards which philosophy, generally, seems to strive. James denies a teleological Truth, positioning truth as an agent rather than a platitude.

The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation* (92).

By this measure, an idea undergoes a process through which, after which, and because of which it becomes true. As the emphasis on the suffix “-ation” shows, truth is an ongoing project, constantly being worked upon as it is reinvented and modified to align with each particular scenario. As in “What Pragmatism Means”, James is countering the idea of truth’s finality. The deconstruction of a platitude allows for the notion of truth to become unique to each iteration it arrives in. Truth is a kind of becoming, as there are machinations in place that an idea passes through to arrive at the label of truth, which in turn labels the idea as “practical.”

The intercession of truth and the movement from philosophical tenet to active force in James’s philosophy invigorates the hermeneutics of the concept of “Truth.” Once truth becomes a presence that “happens” the way it is handled is irreversibly altered. Obviously, this handling occurs through language, but it functions as an agent of process rather than as a product to be reached. We come to understand truth through the investigations we are able to make of it. This is evident in James’s desire to chart a new philosophical movement. Across Amiri Baraka and William James, similarities appear in their thinking of how language may bring truth, and in positing how truth shows itself in language. For Baraka, the truth of language reveals itself in speech’s ability for variation and personal linguistic deviance. Word play is always culturally specific, and the truth of language is constantly mediated across personal agency and cultural hegemony. Language is both unique and singular, malleable and indurate. “Words’ meanings,

but also the rhythm and syntax that frame and propel their concatenation, seek their culture as the final reference for what they are describing of the world” (*Home* 193-194). The interplay between presumed correctness in pronunciation and cadence directly applies to the hegemony of language and its role in dominating black speakers. This truth troubles Baraka yet allows him to stake the claim of the validity of vernacular linguistic variation.

As Houston Baker has shown, Baraka’s celebrations of vernacular speech, seen most prominently in his *Home: Social Essays* (1966), was in direct contention with the overarching intellectual theme of “Integrationist Poetics” that dominated Afro-American literature in the 1950s and early 1960s (Baker 68). This view, expounded upon by Richard Wright among others, argued that with the “inevitable” integration of post-Brown v. Board of Education America, the voice of black poetics would change, too. Wright envisioned racial / social integration as the first piece of a wave of cultural changes that would result in “a homogeneity of *represented* experiences” (68). This cultural change would be, in part, a change in perspective, as black artists would be expected to leave behind vernacular expressions such as “Blues, work songs and hollers ... folktales, boasts, toasts, and dozens” to trade the sensual otherness of black experience for (white) cultural normative expressions of verse and lyric (68-69). Counter to this trend, Baraka argued for the preservation of these expressions, belonging to ‘the lowest classes of Negroes,’ as they represented the most vital components of vernacular expression (73). Baraka took Wright’s argument and committed what Baker calls an “inversion,” exploring the same trends and the same cultural content to dissent from the raced critique of “Negro art”(73). In a 1962 speech later published in *Home* as “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’”, Baraka argues that the “bad taste” apparent in blues music “has continued to keep Negro music as vital as it is” by

maintaining the intimate sociality of vernacular expression. It is the culturally specific, signified performance of the blues that, for Baraka, marks and maintains an important cultural demarcation. “The abandonment of one’s local . . . emotional attachments in favor of the abstract emotional response of what is called ‘the general public’ (which is notoriously white and middle class) has always been the great diluter of any Negro culture” (*Home* 127).

Throughout *Home*, Baraka marks the threshold between personal and cultural, maintaining the presence of racial and socioeconomic hegemony in language’s reiteration. “Truth” becomes something that is revealed in *how*, rather than *what*, someone speaks and in how speech reveals how the culture has shaped that person. In “Expressive Language”, Baraka recounts seeing a street singer, Reverend Pearly Brown, singing, “God don’t never change” (195)! This phrase, the title of the blues lyric originally recorded by Blind Willie Johnson in 1929, reveals the cultural exactitude of vernacular speech that Baraka celebrates:

He does not mean “God does not ever change!” He means “God don’t never change!” The difference, and I said it was crucial, is in the final human reference . . . the form of passage through the world. A man who is rich and famous who sings, “God don’t never change,” is confirming his hegemony and good fortune . . . or merely calling the bank. A blind hopeless black American is saying something very different. He is telling you about the extraordinary order of the world (195).

This vernacular alteration represents a linguistic inversion, the opportunity for a person to explore and express their truth in the language most comfortable to them. The double action of world-making through language while the culture “works” on the speaker emerges as a dialectic within which the speaker may gain worldly knowledge — Pearly Brown’s “extraordinary order” — but still be denied the assumed liberatory nature of this knowledge given the speaker’s racial / social / economic position. This is not a hopeless futility, but beckons again to Baker’s

conception of the blues containing ironic woes and self-deprecating exaltation. As Baraka writes in the 1964 poem “A Guerrilla Handbook”: “Trapped in life, knowing no way out / except description” (*SOS* 101). The speaker is condemned to language, but nonetheless does something bold, something vital, by making it personal.

The truth of what Pearly Brown is singing (and how he sings it) is culturally made, and therefore culturally understood or not. For someone to discern the meanings of his vernacular expression, one must first appreciate the ramifications of his language. For Baraka, upholding the values of uniquely black artistic traditions and verbal techniques was vital to the perpetual mission of combating racial oppression and, worse, the erasure of cultural heterogeneity. Integrationist Poetics seemed to welcome. The self-conscious lack of fluency in the language and/or cadences of power, always a racially charged language controlled by the white middle class, remained a constant interest in Baraka’s writing of the middle 1960s. Later in “Expressive Language,” Baraka argues that:

Being told to ‘speak proper,’ meaning that you become fluent with the jargon of power, is also a part of not ‘speaking proper.’ That is, the culture which desperately understands that it does not ‘speak proper,’ or is not fluent with the terms of social strength, also understands somewhere that its desire to gain such fluency is done at a terrifying risk (195-196).

The project of learning how a person of color can “speak proper” — and the implications of one’s assenting to this or not — appears again in Baraka’s short story “Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Alternate Ending” from *Tales* (1967). There, the story’s protagonist Eddie McGhee Jr. is taught to say “sangwich,” rather than “sammich,” by his teacher Miss Columbe. Eddie’s mother tells him:

‘Sangwich, my christ. That’s worse than sammich. Though you better not let me hear you saying sammich either ... like those Davises.’

‘I don’t say sammich, mamma.’

‘What’s the word then?’

‘Sandwich.’

‘That’s right. And don’t let anyone tell you anything else. Teachers or otherwise’ (39).

It is Louise McGhee’s insistence that her child not emulate the erroneous pronunciation of a teacher that depicts a more complicated yet still incomplete image of the racial politics of language at play across Baraka’s works. Seeking to correct what seems like a malicious lesson in pronunciation, Louise assumes the dominant role of instruction, policing her son’s speech to ensure he will use the ‘correct’ pronunciation of “sandwich.” In this dialogue, questions of correctness do not adhere to the speaker’s ability to speak phonetically or with their skill in comprehending stressed and unstressed syllables. The teacher, Miss Columbe, and Louise are engaged in the same question from distinctly different angles. Both are concerned with the power wielded by a socially construed idea of correctness. The teacher, who advocates for “sangwich,” does so to keep the black student away from what Baraka calls “the semantic rituals of power” (*Home* 193). Louise ensures her son says “sandwich” in the hopes of him finding social success in the sense of social acceptance; if her son pronounces the word as a white person might, he has a greater ability to linguistically blend into the culture. She wants her son to talk white.

## Conclusion: To End as if To End

Before closing this chapter, I want to visit Barbara Christian's 1987 essay "The Race for Theory." Christian's work is useful for several reasons, with the most pressing being its consideration of the ethics of literary criticism as it pertains to the work of black authors. "The Race for Theory" comments on voice and affect in a way that is familiar to those who have tracked Baraka's tonal developments. Her essay contains this thread within a larger statement on the dangers and violence of Criticism and its tendency to group people by race and/or gender into subcategories for examination. Christian writes:

Some of our most daring and potentially radical critics (and by *our* I mean black, women, third world) have been influenced, even coopted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation . . . I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking (Christian 52).

Christian's warning is largely expressed to academics of color who may be pressured into affecting the tone expected of critical writing by emulating and reifying the structures of the cultivated critical language, language that Christian claims, "Mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who know that particular language to control the critical scene" (55). Baraka internalized a similar sentiment, choosing to locate this cooptation of voice and style in himself as a challenge to cultivate new sounds and new works. In a word, his voice changed as he changed.

Reflecting on his life and career in a 1999 interview with Sascha Feinstein, Baraka said,

People want to know why I've changed so much. Hey, I'm alive. That's all. 'Well, you said this yesterday' — yeah, but that was yesterday. ... [DuBois] changed every few minutes. Every time he thought the shit that he said was wrong, he'd say, 'Hey, that shit I said was fucked up.' If you can say that, it seems to me, that's healthier than having people say, 'That shit you said last year was fucked up.' Better you say it first (Sasha Feinstein *Ask Me Now* 20).

Baraka's will to change mustn't be confused with a desire to forget. His changing focus sought to vitalize or revitalize black artistic traditions by venerating those that came before and by invigorating others who may come next. Christian's language on why she writes criticism, and for whom, offers some insight into the act of understanding Baraka's voice(s). "For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know *is*. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense" (Christian 61).

When studying Amiri Baraka, it becomes easy to fixate on the violent or the spectacular. As part of his revolutionary philosophy, he constantly advocates for change, rupture, the dissolution of the unjust and the destruction of the unfair. Titles like "History Is a Bitch," "Somebody Blew Up America" (for which he was removed from the position of New Jersey's poet laureate), and "Death is Not as Natural as You Fags Seem to Think" offer one kind of masculine aggression obsessed with destruction and revolution. This Amiri Baraka might begin to overshadow another one, the poet and critic who labored in love, and on love, throughout his career. Not only a writer of achingly heartfelt prose, but an activist who did the things he did because he cared deeply for his community. A man who returned to his home city of Newark as an adult, entered its activist circles, and spent a lifetime trying to make it a better place. A father who raised several sons and daughters, including Ras Baraka, the current mayor of Newark.

This is all to say that Baraka's understanding of personal temporality, his obsession with tradition, made him a certain kind of radical writer. It is a reminder that he was never one thing, that a writer can be an activist and a revolutionary can be sensual. His celebration of the blues might itself be all the evidence we need. That happy / sad confluence endemic to blues music resonates deeply with Baraka's prose, as his writing is so saturated with life as to feel overwhelming. His retrospective consideration of his shifting stances and changing poetic voice prove that, for Baraka, writing was integral to living. His voice changed because he changed, his writing lived as he lived. In the vein of voices, and in the spirit of change, I end with a beginning.

Quoting "All Songs Are Crazy" from Baraka's final collection *Fashion This*:

So I who have sung and have heard song  
Want to know the singers  
And the song  
I who have learned singing from the oldest singers  
In the world and have sung some songs myself  
Want to create that song that everybody knows  
And that everybody will sing one day.  
So what is left to do? That is how the song  
Begins.

## Chapter Two

### *Blues People, Black Music, and the Stakes of Jazz Criticism*

The previous chapter explores how Baraka is experimenting with and actively working towards an understanding of tradition. He approaches this kinetic, flexible idea through his poetry and through a series of essays compiled in *Black Music*. Baraka, it can be said, began his career by questioning the very cultural tradition he was starting to contribute to. The exploration Baraka underwent in his 1963 work of musical criticism, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, challenged his own self-perception while giving an economic study of black music. His historical work bears influence of Marxist theory, and he frequently works through processes of economic exploitation and appropriation as he imagines the earliest musical practices of African slaves. Perhaps the most pressing matter of Baraka's critical approach in *Blues People* is the consistency with which he levelled his economic criticism. He moves across centuries, watching a culture develop yet continue to function in the same exploitative mode.

Themes of economic exploitation in music criticism were not unique to Baraka, and Baraka himself both represents this Marxist streak while also working on a wider plane. This is to say that while some critics concerned themselves chiefly with breaking down the commercial function of the recording industry and to shed light on the racial politics that adhered to a Marxist definition of exploitation, Baraka did this and more. While racial and economic exploitation exist at the core of *Blues People*, he is working towards an understanding of what it means to be black in America. For Baraka, this idea can not only be understood by breaking down economic issues.

In this chapter, I seek to mirror Baraka's many nuances by exploring his critical work through several critics contemporary to Baraka. I attempt to contextualize these critical threads within a musical moment whose center wasn't just refusing to hold, but was actively imploding. Beginning with the work of Frank Kofsky, a music critic and academic who used the biographical form to break down the class dimensions underpinning the critical split over the free jazz movement. His *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s* (1971) attempted to break down John Coltrane's critical development to show how the political and aesthetic goals of black innovators were being suppressed by white record industry executives. I incorporate passages from *Jazz Revolution* in order to contextualize Baraka's leftist economic inquiry, again striving to place Baraka within a critical method.

Borrowing Kofsky's method of entering the industry-wide question by way of John Coltrane, I rehash the critical debate over Ornette Coleman's 1961 album *Free Jazz*. This debate largely unfolded in the pages of trade publications such as *Downbeat*, a publication with a large and racially mixed readership that included industry insiders and casual jazz enthusiasts. By entering these debates, I seek to locate a democratic or national ethos at play in either the understanding of the music by Coleman himself or present in the critical debates. Always moving back towards Baraka, I investigate this discussion of tradition, inheritance, and Americanness through the work of jazz historian and cultural critic Albert Murray. Murray, who since his death 2013 has been regarded as a high priest of jazz criticism and is rightfully placed at the center of the critical canon of African American literature. Focusing on his *Stomping the Blues* (1976) and an interview from the 1990s collected in *Murray Talks Music: Albert Murray on Jazz and Blues* (2016), I track his understanding of the religious antecedents of blues

performance and his ideas of cultural nationalism. By orienting Murray's work to be in conversation with Baraka's *Blues People*, I attempt to demonstrate discursive overlaps and similarities in each writers' aesthetic agenda. I do this not to subvert Murray or to use him as a crutch to prop up Baraka, who isn't regarded with the same veneration as Murray. Nor do I move ahead assuming that Murray and Baraka stand diametrically opposed to one another in other critical examinations. However, I *do* contend that by studying Baraka, who was a committed black nationalist, and Murray, who was most definitely not, together we can recover a link between these studies that may have been severed by political infighting. A straight-ahead study of *Blues People*, which occurs at the conclusion of this chapter, brings Baraka's peculiar economic critique to bear on African American music history and the history of the recording industry. By offering an interwoven reading of Murray and Baraka, we are given a way to "transcend" the economic function that may have limited the critical potential for writers such as Kofsky. If Murray seems to remain tacit or tactically ambiguous on economic exploitation, we are able to understand how his cultural history and conception of critical modalities align with Baraka with surprising cohesion.

This chapter is working towards conceptualizing a cultural history shaped by sound. Music, particularly blues music, functions as a cultural center for African American communities that, while moving through an upheaval of changes across the time Baraka covers, remain invested in the music. *Blues People* does posit the transference of music into a commodity, but maintains an argument that music is a gateway to the collective memory of a culture, and it is this emotive power that Baraka seems most excited by. The roles that labor and commodification play on the shaping of society are evident here, but Baraka perpetually balances this against the

personal stakes music played in the push away from (and also into) cultural assimilation. He is trying to understand his present moment, both musically and politically, through the music that precedes himself. In choosing to orient a historical critique around sound, Baraka attempts to sculpt a historical study around a vital part of the community itself. What may now be thought of as an “interdisciplinary” approach, Baraka borrowed a move from W.E.B. DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folk*. He not only uses blues music, or what DuBois famously called “sorrow songs,” to find a way into the task at hand, but went as far as saying that the songs are the history themselves. By elevating the lyric, the performance, the bandstand, and the blues holler, to the status of historical artifact, Baraka opens his investigation up to see how, by studying recordings and reimagining unrecorded musical performances, we may come to hear American history.

With the beginnings of a movement in jazz alternatively called “the new thing”, “new black music”, and eventually “free jazz” and the concurrent rise of the Black Nationalist movement of the middle 1960s, jazz criticism had reached a point of divergence. In the wake of Civil Rights came the Black Power movement, which influenced musicians such as Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, and Bill Dixon to engage in a new style of composition and improvisation that directly engaged the cultural criticism of Stokely Carmichael / Kwame Ture, H. Rap Brown, and Malcolm X among others. These musicians pushed the jazz establishment — record executives, producers, A&R representatives, critics and journalists — into unfamiliar waters as their music became inextricably tied to anti-capitalist and anti-racist sentiments.

To be sure, jazz musicians of color have launched political critiques since the earliest years of what came to be known as jazz. More often than not, these critiques dealt in subtle tones. Musicians often placed their critiques in plain sight in the form of titles, leaving enough room for interpretation as to not offend the predominantly white populace of record executives that handled their music. One may think of titles from Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie like “Now’s the Time” (1945) or “A Night in Tunisia” (1942) or earlier blues recordings such as Lead Belly’s “Bourgeois Blues” (1937). (There is a longer and vastly complicated history of blues musicians concealing anti-racist imagery in their titles and lyrics that, because of its metaphoric dimensions, ventures out of the focus of this discussion. Examples include “Devil Got My Woman” (1968) by Skip James.)

As jazz musicians started aligning themselves more concretely with the Black Nationalist movement, their political statements carried beyond titling to influence their compositions, their dress, and their public lives. The line between avant garde politics and avant

music still remains blurry through this period. In fact, as Albert Murray argued, the very concept of an avant garde was being reconstituted on the existential level. To mix the political and the musical never meant one thing for these musicians. While political, musical, and literary iconoclasts did collaborate at this time, simply being in the same space doesn't effectively distinguish an artist as being "more avant garde" than another. Frank Kofsky, the Marxist jazz critic and academic, recounts a mixed-media performance he attended in 1966 for his *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s*. Kofsky recalls a performance by groups lead by saxophonists Jackie McLean, Marion Brown, and Archie Shepp, followed by a speech by Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Poet, activist, and peer to Baraka while at Howard University, A. B. Spellman served as master of ceremonies (Kofsky 156). For Kofsky, this was a profound moment, the coming together of various artistic threads to project a unified message of dissent. But, thinking only along the lines of music, no one would argue that McLean was a greater innovator in the free jazz mode than say, John Coltrane, who wasn't in attendance and who remained politically elusive. Kofsky himself concedes this, writing that "No one would have been particularly surprised had the benefit been planned by Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor, Marion Brown, or Bill Dixon. But *Jackie McLean*" (157)? Using McLean and Coltrane in a side-by-side comparison we can see that the study of the interrelationship of radical politics and experimental music wasn't as clean cut as some activist-critics wanted to assume. McLean may have played a role in the political message of Carmichael / SNCC, and should be remembered favorably for his courage as well as his musical skill. But when we consider the afterlives of free jazz, the ways in which it affected the course of improvised music in the latter half of the twentieth century, Coltrane will always be thought of as

the vital “avant garde” artist. Both McLean and Coltrane pushed the recording industry to change, both through straight-forward political action and through unyielding artistic progression. So when we attempt to study the interactions of politics and music in this period, recall that it is never a static duet, and that one need not “say” something “radical” to act politically.

The evolution of 1960s jazz music, specifically what came to be known as free jazz, began to take a concrete shape as early as 1961 with Ornette Coleman’s album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*. Recorded with a “double quartet” that included free jazz luminaries Don Cherry, Ed Blackwell, and Eric Dolphy, *Free Jazz* gained notoriety as the first album-length improvisation of its kind. On musical and social levels, free jazz caused a rift to form in the community of music critics. This was not simply a divide between those who enjoyed free jazz and who dismissed it as drivel, the camps that formed in the critical community largely played out on lines of race and, increasingly, of labor. As musicians began to expand their public personae as activists, poets, and speakers. No longer confined solely to the bandstand, these players sought to contribute to ongoing discussions and demonstrations on race issues and the war in Vietnam. In a certain sense, the critical divide broke down along the lines of which critics thought these musicians were entitled to do this and those who did not. Simultaneously, a handful of critics, notably Frank Kofsky and Amiri Baraka, began to expand their own critical inquiries in parallel to the musicians they wrote about. These writers wanted to bring a more nuanced and robust tone to critical music writing. Kofsky, a Marxist historian who wrote reviews for *Downbeat* magazine prior to his resignation over accusations that he had been censored by the editors, argued not only for the validation and admiration of the political avant-garde of

1960s jazz, but called for a top-down investigation of the racial makeup of the jazz music industry. Kofsky's 1971 book length study *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s* framed these issues in terms of Marxist class struggle. Viewing recording artists as a predominantly black and lower middle class community whose work was owned and controlled by white recording executives and white critics, Kofsky saw the birth of the free jazz "revolution" as a reckoning not just for music, but for the industry itself.

The easiest way to summarize the status quo in jazz is with the two words *white supremacy*. Themselves being the beneficiaries of the existing order, the foremost critics, all white, are blind to its inequities; they accept them, that is, as natural and even inevitable. But the jazz revolution, in its social aspect, is an indictment of the very inequalities of class and race that have given these critics their privileged position (152).

In Kofsky's eyes, divisions of race and class were actively accelerating jazz away from its rightful status as art and pushing it towards a lowbrow form of entertainment. "The real villain, in short, is not the individual producer or writer, but a social and economic system that insists that art ... be huckerstered as a commodity, and that only those commodities, whether artistic or otherwise, that pass the test of profitability deserve to survive" (148). For Kofsky, the state of the music industry read as a microcosm for a greedy and unequal world. "A long-term solution to this state of affairs can take shape only as a basic structural change in society" (148).

Frank Kofsky's language is useful in that it demonstrates an insurgent form of critical writing that desired to take seriously the political implications of the genre's musicians. Jazz critics such as Leonard Feather and Dan Morgenstern initially rejected both the music being made by artists such as John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, infamously labeling their music as "anti-jazz," while also downplaying the validity of these artists' political disposition.

*Downbeat* coverage of Coleman's *Free Jazz* speaks to the rift that was beginning to form in the new decade. Riffing off of Coleman's "double quartet," *Downbeat* offered a double review, the first of its kind in the magazine's history. Pete Welding, the first reviewer, gave Coleman's album five stars, which *Downbeat* classifies as the rank of "Excellent." Welding seems to not only appreciate what Coleman has done, but demonstrates a precognition for the kind of historical dimensions Baraka's *Blues People* will take. In the January 18, 1962 edition of *Downbeat* Welding writes, "the form of the work gradually reveals itself, and it is seen that the piece is far less unconventional than it might at first appear. It does not break with jazz tradition; rather, it restores to currency an element that has been absent in most jazz since the onset of the swing orchestra — spontaneous group improvisation" (Melville). Welding's appreciation for *Free Jazz* is remarkable in that it tempers the kind of criticism that saw Coleman and artists who followed him as radical. It is a singular piece of criticism in that, unlike other positive critics, Welding does not choose to position *Free Jazz* as a welcomed and much needed secession from jazz history. By placing *Free Jazz* within the tradition, Welding leaves open the room for growth in this experimental style while dictating a fresh critical direction for what jazz should be in the coming years.

Against Welding is John A. Tynan, who gave *Free Jazz* no stars, presumably thinking it worse than "Poor." Tynan's review, just three paragraphs in length, excoriates Coleman's work, working in clinical language to express his disgust and fear of *Free Jazz*. Tynan writes:

Where does neurosis end and psychosis begin? The answer must lie somewhere within this maelstrom. If nothing else, this witch's brew is the logical end product of a bankrupt philosophy of ultraindividualism in music. 'Collective improvisation?' Nonsense. The only semblance of collectivity lies in the fact that these eight nihilists were collected in one

studio at one time and with one common cause: to destroy the music that gave them birth” (Melville).

Tynan’s review hardly touches on the playing of the group or the overall technological ambitions of the album, which was the first jazz record to mix the recording where one quartet would sound through the left speaker with the other quartet panned to the right. Instead, he rejects the vision of *Free Jazz* as “nonsense.” Tynan’s critique of *Free Jazz* doesn’t specifically voice an acceptable or desirable form of jazz, but his anxiety over the “birth” of these musicians seems to make a genealogical or historical point. There seems to be a degree of longing for a past musical style that these musicians are rejecting, yet at the same time there is a lament for the musical past that has allowed for Coleman’s work to come to fruition. For Tynan, *Free Jazz* is the “end product” of years of “ultraindividualism” in the music industry. Tynan’s comment carries a faint trace of Kofsky’s critique of the commodified form of popular music. In the process of commodification, there is a benefit in the creation of a cult of personality. As the process of creating a brand distills the person down to a brand, the individual whose name appears in the largest font on the album cover becomes representative of the product. This is true of *Free Jazz*, which carries the name “ORNETTE COLEMAN” prominently at the center of the album artwork, standing in black ink as opposed to the green used for the title.

His dismissal of the album’s claim of being a collective improvisation underscores an aesthetic agenda that seems more intent on denying “collective improvisation” rather than define what it could sound like. Between Tynan’s assessment of egotistical “nihilists” and the denial of collectivity in Coleman’s work there seems to be an intersection of aesthetics and politics the depth of which touches on trends of the recording industry as well as on Tynan’s construction of musical inheritance in jazz tradition. Calling Coleman’s work the result of a steady pattern of

self-interest by jazz musicians (which he never elaborates on) seems to suggest his disappointment in the recent history of jazz. At the same time, he doesn't take the historical approach to the claim of collectivity like Welding's review does. Still, Tynan's gesture towards a music that "birthed" these musicians suggests his feeling of tradition while also introducing a musical filial piety. He wants Coleman to sound like Lester Young or Coleman Hawkins; for Coleman to validate or acknowledge the past he should leave one foot, so to speak, tethered in the sonic antecedent.

The improvisatory nature of the album, whether the listener appreciates it or not, is hard to ignore. What Tynan chooses to contest is the claim to collectivity. In the context of the work of Frank Kofsky and Amiri Baraka, who variably thought about jazz in conjunction with Marxism, and with the emergent Black Nationalist movement, Tynan's anxiety over Coleman's brand of collectivist "nihilism" may be read in the context of what Fumi Okiji has called "the enduring narrative of individuality in jazz" (16). Between his skepticism of collectivity and "ultraindividualism," Tynan seems to be retrofitting an absent yet desired kind of music. In Tynan's formulation, jazz should project individual voices and creative peculiarities, but do so in the context of collective collaboration and cohesion. Okiji's text *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* argues that, for a certain portion of the critical jazz writing community, the music metaphorically represents an American democratic ethos. Most prominently represented by the writing of Albert Murray and the concert offerings of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra under the direction of Wynton Marsalis, Tynan's critique of *Free Jazz* exists within a larger body of work linking jazz history to a myth of American exceptionalism and an attendant urge for all things "free." Okiji posits that

The enduring narrative of individuality in jazz sees the music as the mirror of an idealized American society — one founded on the sovereignty of the individual but respectful of the need for concessions that allow for a pragmatic democracy ... “The music solves the conundrum of how to go about encouraging self-reliance while supporting the communitarianism necessary for a functioning democratic society ... Jazz-as-democracy employs the music as evidence of American moral superiority (16-17).

While Tynan’s critique does not fit neatly between the poles Okiji is describing, his writing does express an anxiety about prominent musicians such as Coleman venturing too far from the supposed “center” of jazz. If the collectivity of *Free Jazz* is ill-intended, and if jazz of late has apparently fallen prey to egos and celebrity, then Tynan’s desired music would be that which conforms to the sound of “jazz-as-democracy.”

In more ways than one, Tynan’s fear of musical destruction is a kind of national assault. Following Tynan’s description of destruction through Okiji’s argument, he seems correct in labeling Coleman’s music as an attempt to destroy the ideology of democracy imposed on jazz by critics such as himself. In the political climate of the 1960s, Coleman’s music was in fact moving away from any kind of nationalist message. The fraught relationship between critic and creator, as well as democracy and nationalism, must be ironed out here. Okiji is critiquing a dominant ideology in jazz criticism that seeks to align jazz performance with an aesthetic of “freedom” that ties into a larger narrative of American greatness and redemption over structural racism. In the matrix of political and musical happenings unfolding in the 1960s, jazz musicians such as Coleman and critics including Baraka wanted to reconcile jazz culture with an earlier, less polished presentation that remained critical of the middle class society that had finally come to embrace jazz in the late 1950s. Any kind of leftist critique of American society happening in these circles wasn’t necessarily anti-democratic, though they were certainly critical of American

culture and the brand of democracy peddled by writers such as Tynan. In a 1997 interview with Jacques Derrida, Coleman speaks to this. Reflecting on the uses for musical expression and his background moving through various forms of jazz Coleman says, “I think that sound has a much more democratic relationship to information, because you don’t need the alphabet to understand music” (“The Other’s Language” 319-320). Coleman’s perpetual artistic development and his desire to innovate carried through the thirty five years between recording *Free Jazz* and speaking to Derrida. In this way Coleman’s reinventions, endemic to his character, are constantly toying with notions of the democratic within the musical.

As critics, Welding and Tynan are concerned with collectivity in a way Coleman is not. Each writer addresses collectivity as historically significant. For Welding, a specific past is conjured by way of eliding another. In Tynan, Coleman’s music is dangerous in that it seeks not only to distance itself from a past of debatable existence, but to demolish this history all together. Coleman’s brand of democratic practice complicates each critic's polar separation of collectivity and individualism by finding one within the other. Interpersonal connection and musical collaboration are, for Coleman, processes integral to the formation of democracy. “At the same time,” he tells Derrida, “I would like to be able to speak of the relationship between two talents, between two doings. For me, the human relationship is much more beautiful, because it allows you to gain the freedom that you desire, for yourself and for the other” (328). Coleman’s vision of democracy aligns closely with the amendment Okiji makes to the history of criticism she is addressing. Like Coleman, she sees the reasons for romantic democratic assumptions, conceding that “The democracy narrative recognizes a collective in jazz but misconstrues the complex, contradictory, irresolvable relationships as a harmonious resolution to do what one wants, so

long as one is tolerant” (Okiji 18). Okiji’s concession acknowledges the long standing pairing of jazz aesthetics and an American democratic tradition, or freedom impulse, while remaining critical of this history.

While Okiji’s recent study offers several insightful readings of the history of jazz criticism, it is worth departing from her work to consider the long-standing opposition of such claims. In the field of jazz criticism, “nationalist” language has often been utilized to work towards a more capacious understanding of the language of patriotism. In fact, the “complex, contradictory, irresolvable relationships” Okiji speaks of exist in the most robust jazz criticism. Albert Murray’s writing on jazz and blues histories and their repercussions on American society embodies a “patriotic” voice in the sense that he fills his prose with a nuanced conception of American life, the great and the terrible, that reveals an understanding that the cultural functions of beauty and terror are never as far apart as one might wish them to be. In Murray’s writing, jazz is framed as something that all of us can understand and be moved by. Like Tynan’s criticism of Ornette Coleman, Murray seems to lead with a social and musical disposition to his criticism that carves out what may, or may not, be labeled as “jazz.” Here, I will attempt to track his thinking on jazz and blues through his 1976 study *Stomping the Blues* and some of the final essays and interviews he composed at the end of his career. In each of these readings, Murray consistently explains the components of jazz composition and performance by returning to the political intent of the artist. Though vigilant of the dynamic personhood of any performer, Murray seems to mark two distinct identities of a jazz song or performer, one personal and the other national. Often critical of any jazz musician that he finds too subversive, Murray will either dismiss or reject a player’s personal politics in order to return to a genre-wide statement

venerating the “dionysian atmosphere” of jazz (*Murray Talks Music* 220). By “dionysian,” Murray wants to celebrate music that can capture great sadness within revelry. Murray writes that “dionysian” music has “groovy delight” in the recollection of a “tale of woe,” understanding musical articulations of pain and suffering may be nested within celebratory music. While there is an element of subversion integral to the discrete placement of sadness within celebration, Murray may be eager to keep this relationship placed at the popular center of jazz compositions. If his preferred emotional presentation is the “woe” within the “delight,” he would be displeased with more aggressive styles developing in the 1960s that traded groove and blues-based improvisation for arhythmic, experimental techniques that projected an openly aggressive tone.

Murray was not by any means the only critic to lead with an ideology of what jazz *should* be. Each critic, whether one of the relatively conservative stance of Albert Murray or the class-conscious criticism of Baraka or Kofsky, brought a set of preconceived values to the music in order to find a history that cohered to their vision. Before further engagement with any of these writers, it is worth considering a statement by Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli in their 1971 french-language text *Free Jazz, Black Power*. In their chapter “The Blind Task of Criticism,” Carles and Comolli consider the role criticism has played through the assimilation of jazz music into the grain of American culture. “Criticism played *its* role — mediation and transmission — in the relatively successful molding and remodeling of jazz by the cultural and commercial interests of the dominant ideology” (48). They continue to argue that, rather than serve jazz itself, critics historically worked “first and foremost for an ideology and a culture that could only see themselves as dominant, and could only admit black culture and music inasmuch as they were dominated” (48-49). Carles and Comolli’s own stance is in regards to the critical

establishment and ideologies of assimilation is complex, and will be addressed later. Though they later construct a polarity between “Black jazz criticism” and the “Western critic,” their previous point adequately addresses the conflict of critical distance that each critic — Murray, Welding, Tynan, Kofsky, Okiji, and Baraka — must confront in their compositions.

In a 1994 interview with trumpeter, educator, and leader of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra Wynton Marsalis, Albert Murray rehashes many of the arguments he had made throughout his career. As the editor, Paul Devlin, notes in the introduction to their interview, Marsalis was a close associate to and student of Murray. They had spent years working together to establish Jazz at Lincoln Center and Marsalis took Murray’s aesthetic agenda seriously. The interview is Marsalis setting Murray up with questions that allow him to expound on jazz and its relationship to the American character. As Devlin writes, “Marsalis is acting as a sort of home-run derby pitcher here, serving up questions to which he already knows the answers in general outline, while encouraging Murray to aim for the fences with his answers” (*Murray Talks Music* 3). Here, Murray confronts the functions of criticism, critiques “avant-garde” musicians, and ends by asserting the connection between jazz and American culture.

From the beginning of the exchange, Murray presents a critique of jazz criticism that at times feels self defeating. Murray asserts that the function of jazz criticism is to “mediate between the unfamiliar statement and the uninitiated listener ... not to prescribe what somebody does — that destroys the creative process” (10)! The critic should be a well-informed, compassionate listener who can guide the “uninitiated” listener to a new level of understanding. The critic “decode[s] what is strange” for the listener who may not be able to do so themselves. Murray’s separation of the “initiated,” that is “informed,” critic from the “uninitiated” has a

particular resonance to what he earlier calls the “ritual” at the root of all art forms. When Marsalis questions what he may mean by ritual, which he first defines as “the playful reenactment,” Murray claims “When they go over that, when they practice it, we call that ritual. You see? From ritual you get a mind-set that helps you to continue” (4). While one point is specifically about criticism and the other is painting the beginning of art forms in broad strokes, it is useful to connect the points by the similarities of language. With their religious undertones, both draw lines of exclusion that separate parties on lines of understanding. “Ritual” and “(un)initiated” diverge in their uses here as Murray aligns the proper critic with the initiated group. However, in his thinking on practice as ritual, it would feel more proper to place the critic outside of the circle of the initiated, as one can only enter into the ritual if they are performing. It could also be argued that Murray’s concept of the ritual could be applied to critics separately from musicians, as they work to create and define their own “perception of reality.” The crucial difference in Murray’s statement is that he doesn’t mark these separations but instead groups the critic who has properly “decod[ed] the strange” in with the musicians who have created the work, leaving only the “uninitiated listener” outside of the ritual space.

This grouping or separation, of course, is what Murray imagines as the *ideal* relationship between musician, critic, and listener. He never names anyone he sees as achieving this role of musical guide, but instead laments the general shortcomings of jazz writers. In both his rebuke of popular jazz writing styles and in his rejection of the free jazz avant-garde to be discussed later, Murray appears deeply skeptical of an “intellectual” approach to music. The jazz critic “doesn’t know enough about what is being stylized, the raw experience. You can see it being transformed into an aesthetic statement. But, you see, criticism has gotta be based on taste” (11). Here,

Murray's critique presents a vexing issue when handling the divide between the aesthetic and the political. What is the difference between that which is "stylized" and aesthetics? Moreover, how can the critic re-orient their work to approach criticism first and foremost as an issue of "taste"? Murray wants to come to the music freed from any conventions of what the music should sound like, but this feels like "taste" again. In a highly literal turn, Murray draws a culinary parallel to music criticism, saying that "taste in the arts is pretty much the same as it is in the kitchen and in the dining room" (11)! Murray's point is, while slightly humorous, well intentioned and indicative of the kind of criticism he wants writers to be moving towards. It is this process of measured experimentation, of trusting oneself to work without a recipe, that he sees as the mark of a true artist and benevolent critic. Murray writes:

It's the sense of the optimum proportion and processing of the ingredients in a given recipe. In other words, you've got to know a lot about the blues. You've had to have heard a lot of the blues on various levels to develop taste to say this is about right: it's brown enough here, we stirred it enough here, we've left it in, we'll serve it at this temperature or that. That comes from a lot of experience with the whole process of moving from the raw experience to the statement (11).

Murray's about-face into the blues analogy suggests the proximity he sees between blues and jazz. One must not only develop as a jazz player by first excelling as a blues musician, the player should remain cognizant to keep that musical template close to the heart of their music. Murray's statement is directed foremost towards the critic, who should be adept in blues history and various musical flavors. Like the expert of the home kitchen who cooks by feel, Murray's ideal critic has an intuitive understanding of the blues. When we think of "taste" rather than simply the idea of aesthetics, we might consider the degree to which the "critic" has interpreted the task at hand. Murray's analogy actually leaves the space of aesthetics/the critic, as the chef uses

intuition rather than inquiry. This does not suggest a naivety or inability to “think critically” about their creation, but rather is the ability of someone to improvise because they have such an intimate relationship to their creation. It seems seamless because the person has performed these tasks so many times; the labor of learning is obscured by the intensity of the personal relationship to the product. The chef gains their knowledge through lived experimentation, trial and error, tactile memory, always concerned with the product as it stands in that moment (tonight’s meal) rather than the concerns of the dish's history. When we cook, we want to make the best steak we’ve ever cooked, but we don’t consider the great steaks of culinary history.

Murray’s thoughts about *how* the critic (or player) can translate “from the raw experience to the statement” beckons back to Carles and Comolli’s point about the “filtering” and “reshaping” of jazz through cultural criticism. Returning to Murray’s first point about the critic acting as a guide, we see Murray explicitly using the same language as Carles and Comolli when he asserts that the critic must “mediate” the musical work on behalf of the listener (10). The distinction between aesthetics and “taste” remains difficult to parse, but both would seem to direct the listener towards a more nuanced understanding of the piece. For Murray, coming to a fuller understanding of the intentions and aesthetic dimensions of a musical performance calls for a wider historical grasp of what surrounds the music’s creation, yet he frequently stops short of validating music’s political implications. In the Marsalis interview, as well as *Stomping the Blues*, Murray pushes against the possibility of the political and the artistic sublimating in a piece of music. Against his desire to downplay the political statements of free jazz musicians is his tendency to posit jazz as the “quintessential American form of expression” (31). When he is not critiquing the idea of a political / artistic avant garde, Murray himself positions jazz as a

symbolic crossroads of American ideals that is often fraught with political overtones. In what would be his final nonfiction essay published in his lifetime, Murray asserts that, “By its very nature, jazz typifies the national dynamics or natural history of exploration, discovery, and improvisation; and the ever so tentative settlement of what might become a great metropolis, a pit stop, or a ghost town of lost chords” (225). The words “exploration, discovery, and improvisation” each contain unique clusters of history, almost all of which brings forth a past of violence, violation, and incursion. Murray may have intended this with these words, and would thereby be forwarding a capacious understanding of both jazz history and the history of colonization that would resonate with the politics of the avant garde. This is a thorny issue in Murray’s writing, and his writing often voices an understanding of history that walks both sides of the line that marks jazz as a vehicle for political and artistic rebellion or an implicitly “American” expression that projects a politically benign patriotic message. It is how he can say, in the same interview, that “the spirit of the blues and jazz is always to counterstate adversity and negative feelings about the outcome of things” (20) while also saying, about politically engaged musicians of the mid twentieth century, “They wanted to be part of a social and political revolution. They simply bootlegged what was happening in jazz to say it was a part of something that it was not really a part of” (22). There seems to be a limit to the kinds of political messages Murray wants to find in jazz performance, and his criticism desires to strike a balance between the politically conscious performer and the adept musician that always places musicianship in a superior position to all else.

For Murray to call jazz music “American” does not mean he is forwarding a blindly patriotic view of the music or of history. Murray does not use this description to give a

thumbs-up to the unsettling and multiplicitous histories that jazz music unfolds out of. His criticism doesn't reach as far in terms of revolutionary teleology as Baraka's, but that does not mean his writing can be thought of as parochial or ignorant. In fact, Murray's idea of "American music" may carry more nuanced niches that can interpret systemic violence and luxurious musical celebration as two parts of a greater whole. The idea of "American" doesn't only mean xenophobic, homophobic, racist. For Murray, it can reflect these elements while also venerating the unique character of cultural resistance and artistic beauty endemic to African American culture. Much like Murray's criticism around this subject, "American" never means quite one thing. It isn't static and it's both deeply personal and socially vast.

We may find an answer to this conflict by turning to Murray's *Stomping the Blues*. His first book-length collection focused solely on music history, Murray is thinking through the historical influences on blues music while tracking their development in early jazz innovators such as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington. These musicians would become touchstones for Murray's conceptual understanding of jazz, especially Armstrong, who he described as the "one *indisputably avant-garde musician*" while in conversation with Wynton Marsalis (15). *Stomping the Blues* offers insight into how Murray is formulating the proximity of blues to jazz, a crucial component in determining the historical dimensions that color his work. The penultimate chapter, "Folk Art and Fine Art" showcases Murray working out his thinking on blues tradition, tensions between innovation and tradition, and taking on claims of "realness" that some critics (certainly including Amiri Baraka) seem to find endemic to blues and/or other folk expressions. Beginning his chapter by introducing the idea held by "some people" that blues music as such can not and should not be played or refined by "professional musicians" because it

represents “a basic violation of the priceless integrity of folk art,” Murray goes on to assert that folk forms represent a stagnant musical past, not the key to innovation. He writes,

Folk expression is nothing if not conventional in the most fundamental sense of the word. Far from being spontaneous, as is so often supposed, it is formal. ... Being inherently conservative or traditional, folk expression is necessarily imitative and thus not primordial in any intrinsic sense at all but *derivative*” (203-04).

Murray does not draw this distinction to reduce the validity or artfulness of folk forms, but rather he does this to advocate for a respect of these forms as something wholly *different* than what developed later. He is nixing the idea of collective improvisation being the tie that binds “primordial” forms of expression with the futurist experiments of the 1960s musical avant garde, choosing instead to hold them apart to investigate the former in greater detail. In fact, Murray reduces the emphasis placed on collectivity generally, arguing that “It is the individual genius who deviates, experiments, and riffs. Folk craftsmen and artists conform” (208). Murray’s message is that, by associating the folk form too closely with a later musical culture bent towards experiments and innovation, one’s approach to the folk form will be negatively altered by coming to the music with assumptions garnered by the other. “Derivative” is not to say drab, but only to demarcate spaces for cultural expression. Murray claims that folk expressions are not “primitive” or “crude” but rather “represent the very highest refinement of the rituals and technologies of a given culture” (208). He seems to be creating a strawman in these arguments, directing his points against a vague ‘other’ who has abstracted the purposes or functions of folk traditions. “But once again the orthodox conformist is somehow made out to be a rebel. Once again the naivete of the unsophisticated is represented as being a higher form of sophistication. It is no such thing” (208). By separating one from the other, Murray is beginning to construct a

tradition of jazz's evolution that, while connected to the past, doesn't try to overemphasize the significance of early players by applying the same metrics to early musicians and later innovators.

This is not a clean bifurcation, but rather a hierarchization that places later improvisatory work above its antecedents. Again, Murray seems to be doing this not to cast shade onto one form to better elevate another, but rather to argue that connecting these forms does damage to the appreciation of their unique peculiarities. Murray writes, "Promoters of folk art as the true art have you believe that a provincial musical sensibility is somehow a greater endowment than a more cosmopolitan sensibility plus a greater mastery of technique. It absolutely is not. It limits not only what folk artists can do but also what they can perceive and imagine in the first place" (212). All of this comes to bear on the larger project of tracking Murray's thoughts on the connectedness of politics and aesthetics in the lives of jazz and blues musicians in that, by bringing out Murray's gripes with the critical establishment and unpacking his thoughts on music history, we begin to see the things that factor into his critical template.

For Murray, the blues folk idiom stands at a place of departure for jazz; a threshold that the music had to pass through to get to a higher, more intellectual level. In his conception of folk art's "derivative" nature, the blues could only go so far before giving way to more complex art. While not dismissive of the blues, Murray places the music at a distance from the musical complexity of later jazz musicians through an anachronistic reading of both the music and musicians. As Murray says to Marsalis about W. C. Handy, an early African American composer and blues musician who wrote standards such as "Memphis Blues" and "St. Louis Blues," Handy "codified the folk-level blues and put it in the public domain so that *more sophisticated*

*musicians* could look at it and go to work on it” (*Murray Talks Music* 13). For Murray, the role of the early historical figures in music such as W. C. Handy is to exemplify someone who laid the groundwork for those who came after him. It is an appreciation of history that advocates for a neat progression forward, as each successive generation bears its influences while adding its own innovations. Murray seeks to find a teleological throughline for jazz history. With the example of Handy and “folk-level blues,” he demonstrates a tendency to organize music history as a progression of complexity. W. C. Handy did this so Louis Armstrong could do this; Coleman Hawkins did this so Miles Davis could do this; Charlie Parker did this so John Coltrane could do this, etc. This does not mean to suggest he only appreciates art based on newness — to the contrary, publishing *Stomping the Blues* at all seems to demonstrate his commitment to jazz’s earliest history — but that his conception of music history is always in a forward-moving trajectory.

It feels like too complicated a disposition to label “conservative,” in terms of aesthetics or otherwise, but Murray’s construction of musical development will cause him to stand in opposition to Baraka, who explores the vitality of “recovering” blues histories in his *Blues People*. Again, it is by understanding Murray’s conception of the historical within the musical that brings a nuanced understanding of his political disposition. It is his idea of a historical progression that leads him to label the free jazz movement as out of step with jazz history. Like in his labeling of Louis Armstrong as an “indisput[able]” avant-garde musician, Murray finds the revolutionary in musical work that bears traces of its roots. Pushing too far out of one’s inherited sonic roadmap is not revolutionary, but only postures as such by way of its peculiarity. Writing on a swath of jazz heroes from the first three decades of the genre’s history including Jelly Roll

Morton, King Oliver, Bessie Smith, and Charlie Parker, Murray contends that “the revolutionary nature of their innovations and syntheses was not nearly so much a matter of a quest for newness for the sake of change as of the modifications necessary in order to maintain the definitive essentials of the idiom” (*Stomping the Blues* 252). Across the decades that separate the Marsalis interview and *Stomping the Blues*, Murray remains steadfast in his emphasis on music that embraces the trappings of style and tradition while also feeling bold enough to push towards something different. Rather than musical experimentation *sui generis*, Murray sees value in measured change. Attempting to explain how a “functional” avant-garde should look, Murray tells Marsalis,

We want a bulwark against entropy. Things are constantly falling apart; we want something to hold on to. ... We know that we've gotta change with the times, but we've gotta have some basis for the change. So, tradition is that which continues. It is not that which freezes (16).

Like in his comments on the qualities of jazz that make it “America’s music,” Murray’s idea of a “basis for the change” will be contested by other critics that attempt to establish a connection between larger socioeconomic factors and musical experimentation. For Murray, the basis for change can (and should) only exist in purely musical terms. That is, all evidence for either breaking from or adhering to traditions will manifest in the music that is being made around the potential innovator. The most significant dividing line between Albert Murray and his contemporaries who advocated for the social agenda shared by black power musicians and activists is that his “hearing,” as it pertained to iconoclastic musical development, gravitated towards those who drew closer to the music that had been previously palatable for a consumer audience. This is not to reduce Murray’s critical importance or to frame free jazz as the

end-all-be-all of experimentation, but to again argue for understanding Murray's criticism as inclined toward plotting historical change with demonstrable examples of progression.

Contrary to this method, other critics such as Baraka will reverse engineer this approach, working backward through history to forge a revisionist outlook on jazz and coming to jazz criticism through the lens of social justice. There is, of course, no way more correct than the other to approach these histories. It would be foolish to think that only one school of criticism considered how jazz musicians experimented with new sounds after hearing an old recording, or to say that Murray didn't understand the totality of person's being when he wrote that "blues musicians do not show very much conscious involvement with the philosophical implications of what they play" (*Stomping* 227). Before considering the perspectives explored in *Blues People*, it is important to leave Murray's work by reflecting on the stakes at play in the music he studied. Though writing simultaneously to one another, (Murray was nearly twenty years older than Baraka, but began publishing work almost ten years after Baraka began writing — the two died within months of one another) Murray's concentration on the early history of jazz caused him to focus on pre World War Two musicians, many of whom were simply unable to speak or act in a way that later revolutionary musicians could. It has never been completely safe for African Americans to speak out in this country, and both the early recording industry and the jazz community of the middle 1960s were not havens for free speech and radical thought for black musicians. In a sense, Murray's writing understands this distinction. Though Baraka and others would disagree with Murray's emphasis on individual genius and his demarcation of blues from jazz on the basis of complexity, his desire to make this separation gives us room to see the social differences that these distinct periods represent. Of course, it may be wavering on the side of the

socially conscious critic to give such a reading of Murray's argument, but it is valuable to draw a tacit comparison before venturing back into Baraka's critical work.

In Baraka, we are faced with another kind of critical iconoclast. A polemicist at heart, Baraka's work seeks to provoke its reader. Even when thinking historically, Baraka is constantly positioning musical development through an ongoing series of tensions, encounters that must be resolved through change. At their core, the works of Murray and Baraka ask similar questions: What does it mean to create art in a country as divided and as violent as the United States? How does music express what words can't say, and why? What are the limitations of politics, what are the possibilities of musical expression? In these existential questions the two seem to separate. But while Murray and Baraka affect different critical postures, it would be foolish to accept one voice as the "radical" and the other as the "establishment." Though Amiri Baraka wore many hats, one of which was that of a political activist of many different stripes throughout his life, the critical work of *Blues People* is not much more inflammatory than *Stomping the Blues* or the thinking of Albert Murray at the end of his life. Murray's work requires a careful excavation to bring to light the radical complexities of his at times opaque language on music and politics; Baraka's incendiary language can cause the reader to miss the nuances of his approach, often causing him to be read only for his radical claims. In approaching *Blues People* by way of Albert Murray, I hope to further contextualize his claims. This is not to dismiss his praxis, but to demonstrate the exchange of ideas that was unfolding in music criticism of the middle 1960s into the early 1970s. Though a writer of a different ilk, Albert Murray questioned the progression of time, the roles of tradition, and the place jazz held in American society just as often as Amiri

Baraka did, and with equal gusto. It is in the answers to these questions we see them drift apart, and where Baraka's place as free jazz's vociferous defender would become established.

When Amiri Baraka published *Blues People* in 1963, he was still relatively unknown. Immediately following *Blues People*, Baraka would begin to occupy a greater portion of the public eye through the publication of his second collection of poems, *Dead Lecturer*, and for the staging of his Obie award-winning play *Dutchman*, both in 1964. It remains a "youthful" text in the positive sense: daring and impulsive, nuanced but bold in its conclusions. Writing in a revised introduction several decades later, Baraka reflected on what the work meant for him as a young poet, critic, and music lover. "Even though I was admittedly and very openly shooting from the hip ... I had been aiming for a long time before I reached for the machine. ... The book, from its opening words, got me high. It made me reach for more and more and more of what I had carried for years, for more of what I had to say, for more of myself" (*Blues People* vii).

Publishing *Blues People* garnered Baraka attention from various communities who would have been previously unfamiliar with his work, which at that time only included his first collection *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* and various essays. His work received critical attention from academics, who recognized Baraka's greatest success in the text's "failure." Included in a group of *Blues People* reviews published in the January 1965 volume of *Ethnomusicology*, John F. Szwed wrote, "Leroi Jones has attempted to understand the social and the musical history of the American Negro as causally related phenomena, and although it cannot be said he has succeeded, he has nevertheless lifted the matter to a level heretofore not even considered" (63).

Though working as a popular music journalist, Baraka's investigation demanded serious attention by begging its reader to take seriously the existential significance of blues aesthetics.

Baraka turned to music as a way into the history of African influence in the United States. Conceiving of the history of American culture as a series of amalgamations that birthed the African American (or in Baraka's 1963 parlance, the American Negro), he found significance in the development of the blues and later jazz as distinctly black, distinctly American, practices. The blues, as an idea or disposition, had some origin in African history, but it was in the violence of capture and of enslavement that Baraka saw the birth of the blues. "[The blues] is an American music; the product of the black man in this country: or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives" (*BP* 17). Baraka is doing significant work by placing musical origins in an act of forced migration and (re)establishment. The mediation from African to American — while all the time being "captive" — is a reiterative experience that remains personal yet vague in how it is discussed. This is evidenced in Baraka's language: Blues does not come to be in a community of slaves or results from individual contributions to the culture, but is a product of the totemic "black man." Baraka will approach this issue in several ways throughout *Blues People*, but it is worth noticing his use of the singular here. Placing origins in the forced migration of slavery and the new "character" this wrought inscribes a foundational moment in American cultural history at a time with no historical record kept by those who were most affected by slavery. From the beginning of *Blues People*, Baraka wants to give this irrecoverable past a soundscape by approaching it with the acknowledgment of its musical inheritance. We see this at work in the text's title, *Blues People*, which, by immediately turning to the nascent African American culture of the seventeenth century, conjures a textual-sonic linkage by associating "blues" — a word that would connote a certain kind of musical performance for the

reader — with the lived experience (where they lived, what they sounded like) of enslaved peoples.

Similarly to Albert Murray, Baraka is positing blues music as an American creation. What he called the “blues impulse” was at the core of the African American identity. It was what set the black musician apart from the rest of American culture, both as a means of cultural preservation and (for a time) because the music could not be understood or accepted by white Americans. The “blues impulse ... obscured the most extreme ideas of *assimilation* for most Negroes, and made any notion of the complete abandonment of the traditional black culture an unrealizable possibility” (142). Questions of assimilation concern both Baraka and Murray, but it is Baraka who constantly complicates what “assimilation” might mean, and why it might occur. Similarly to the opposition he took to Richard Wright’s concept of Integrationist Poetics covered in the previous chapter, Baraka argues that there is an indelible streak of African American culture that resists assimilation or integration, desiring instead to stand apart with creative works freed from the aesthetic principles of Western art. Also as in the previous chapter, Baraka’s claims about the “West” are relatively ambiguous, as he seems comfortable validating blues music as the highest art form to develop out of the cultural clash of slavery in early American history yet feels that the music is misconstrued by the West itself. On the tension between the West, black musical practices, and what makes an “American,” Baraka writes,

But the term *blues* relates directly to the Negro, and his *personal* involvement in America ... *Blues* means a Negro experience, it is one music the Negro made that could not be transferred into a more general significance than the one the Negro gave it initially ... Bessie Smith was not an American, though the experience she relates could hardly have existed outside America; she was a Negro. Her music still remained outside the mainstream of American thought, but it was much closer than any Negro music before it (94)

If black musicians are American by location, they remain removed from the culture by a singular experience of being black. Yet at the same time, it would seem like that experience is part of the machinations of “becoming” American, and that through this kind of Americanization one would more fully understand the country’s culture. The tension between blackness and American culture, where one seems to be inextricably a part of the other yet still apart, stands at odds with what Baraka sees as the eventuality of assimilating into the American mainstream. The fact that black music “could not be transferred into a more general significance” though Bessie Smith’s music moved closer to the American mainstream means that there was a shifting cultural significance to this music.

*Blues People* is concerned with processes of assimilation and what that might mean, and approaches this loaded term by several angles. In a broad periodization, Baraka marks both blues and jazz as having “primitive,” “classic,” and “modern” movements. The “primitive” music was issued out of the work songs sung by slaves. Developing out of these labor traditions, the music expanded and was complicated by early innovators who reflected changing social conditions in their music. Soon, “the work song could no longer contain the growing experience of this country that Negroes began to respond to ... The music of the Negro began to reflect these social and cultural complexities” (62). In the primitive blues stage, both the music and the people were separated from society by systemic social conditions, but Baraka wants to stress the vital importance of this societal exile on the machinations of African American art traditions.

The Negro, during those few years after the end of slavery, just before the exodus to the Northern cities, stood further away from the mainstream of American society than at any other time. It was also during these years that the Negro’s music lost a great many of the more superficial forms it had borrowed from the white man, and the forms that we recognize now as blues began to appear (59).

This would predate the assimilation that he sees happening in later music, as white America not only grew accustomed to blues music, but began to desire its consumption and emulation. As we move closer to the career of Bessie Smith (1894-1937), the role of the blues singer as performer takes new significance in the nascent “classic” blues period. Performers like Smith and Ma Rainey were explicitly “professional” musicians who commanded attention, respect, and perhaps most importantly, remuneration, for their talents. Echoing comments made in *Stomping the Blues*, Baraka writes that “an external and sophisticated idea of performance had come to the blues, moving it past the casualness of the ‘folk’ to the conditioned emotional gesture of the ‘public’” (82). Distinctions between “folk” and “public” connotes both locale and audience. The originary site of the “folk” performance would have been the field, where laborers would take up a song to both to make the work day more enjoyable and to communicate coded messages to one another unbeknownst to slave overseers.<sup>3</sup> This, of course, would be a racially specific performance, with music being made by and for the group of people engaging in the same task, all of which is unfolding under the duress of enslavement surveillance. It was not “music,” though it was musical. The “public” would be, presumably, a mixed race (and more than likely segregated) group of people who would now comprise an audience. The audience member, whose participation is marked by their (often) tacit acknowledgment of the performer, is now a paying customer in a performance space. The “conditioned” form of the public performance suggests audience participation (silence when desired by the performers, applause when the piece is concluded, etc.) as well as the separation necessary to mark the performer as the

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<sup>3</sup> For more on these musical practices, which lie outside of the scope of this project, see *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* by Ronald Radano and *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons and Speech* by Shane White and Graham White.

“professional entertainer.” The singer is not necessarily a member of the same community that consumes the work, and approaches their performance with the goals of refining and presenting the most satisfactory form of their repertoire.

It is this turn away from the “functional” dimensions of musical performance that interests Baraka, and it is in this that he sees the birth of “classic” blues giving way to a marketable product made by black artists and consumed by white audiences. What he calls the “assimilation” of black music and culture Baraka has also called “the socio-cultural merger that later produced jazz” (148). As stated above, the popularity of the blues form would bring it perpetually closer to the mainstream, as white audiences paid to hear it and white musicians sought to learn its nuances. To Baraka, this shift not only suggested a change in taste or an expansion of America’s popular palette, but marked a change in the black communities understanding of itself in its relationship to the culture at large. “The emergence of classic blues and the popularization of jazz occurred around the same time. Both are the results of social and psychological changes within the Negro group as it moved toward the mainstream of American society” (93). Baraka, here and elsewhere, expresses an anxiety for the loss of control of cultural products. This does not only pertain to the rise of recording technologies that allowed for the recording, reproduction, and sale of black music for the purchasing public, or the emulation (and arguably, the appropriation) of black music by white musicians. He also acknowledges the erasure of time, as the machinations of history perpetually separated musicians from the culture that first gave birth to the “blues impulse.”

In tracking the development of several strains of blues and jazz techniques, there is a quiet elegy for the primitive at play underneath his theories of development. Integral to

understanding changes in the music is to be able to find the primitive within the contemporary, the resistant at play within the popular. Writing about the popularity of dance bands like those of Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington, Baraka notes that “the dance bands or society orchestra of the North replaced the plot of land, for they were the musician’s only means of existence, and the solo, like the holler, was the only link with an earlier, more intense sense of the in its most vital relationship to the world” (153). Though linking the popular dance band style of composition to a forgotten, more “vital” kind of intensity, he will also argue that it is in this push for newness (which, economic factors aside, the dance band *did* represent) that marks the defining characteristics of both the music and the person making it. “The most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time” (137). At the close of *Blues People*, Baraka attempts to bring these thoughts to a resolution, stating that “the music depends for its form on the same references as a primitive blues forms” (226). As in the previous chapter’s focus on his poetry and later music criticism, Baraka is again establishing a nonlinear historical affinity between the “modern” and the “primitive.”

In this closing chapter, “The Modern Scene,” Baraka seeks to associate controversial saxophonists of the 1960s jazz community, including Ornette Coleman, with earlier techniques used by R&B “honkers,” bringing all of these sounds to rest in the musical and religious past. “Players like Coleman, [John] Coltrane, and [Sonny] Rollins literally scream and rant in imitation of the human voice, sounding many times like the unfettered primitive shouters” (227). As Baraka notes earlier in his text, “Blues issued directly out of the shout and, of course, the spiritual” (62). Here, Baraka is not only arguing that Coleman, Coltrane, and Rollins experiment

with lexicon of the blues, but finds precedent for their tonal experiments across centuries of African American cultural expressions.

What these musicians are “unfettered” from varies depending on how one approaches the statement. The “unfettered primitive shouter” may be labeled as such because they aren’t beholden to the economic factors that contributed to style. It would be wrong to approach the “primitive” musicians / religious practitioners through an anachronistic lens, as Baraka may be doing here, but there is a point to be made about the nonprofessional being relatively unencumbered compared to the later musicians. Though the “shouter” may have been influenced by local (whatever local meant for that person) styles of performance they heard in performances or recitations, they would not have had the anxiety to adhere to a sound for economic reasons. Writing about the influence of recording technologies in later blues music, Baraka says, “phonograph records themselves actually *created* whole styles of blues-singing. And even though the local traditions remained, the phonograph record produced the first blues stars and nationally known blues personalities” (102). Though it is largely left alone in *Blues People*, Baraka does seem cognizant of the material culture that influenced styles of playing, adding another economic dimension to questions of tradition, emulation, and inheritance previously proposed by Albert Murray. Understanding how the material culture created a body of shared knowledge, in the context of both Baraka’s comments on the “shouters” and of free jazz musicians, deepens the connections between musicians on either side of the rise of the commercial enterprise of recording. If the shouters were unaware of and therefore untouched by a recording industry, then these musicians, whose musical careers were defined by acceptance into the recording industry but then choosing to defy its standards of composition, would

represent a similar yet different kind of originality. In short, the free jazz musicians would essentially *only* know the recording industry, its tendencies and its pressures, but would turn away from these to pursue a different aesthetic agenda based in localism (the relatively small group of avant-garde musicians in cities such as Chicago and New York). These kinds of connections are evident in Baraka's association with the primitive blues musicians. He sees the turn away from guaranteed economic success ensured by producing more conventional albums to be an appeal to a time when blues music wasn't a hot commodity and to a style of religious expression that valued audacious, guttural sounds, all of which circled around a desire to emulate the capabilities of the human voice.

When Rollins, Coleman, and Coltrane "rant" and "scream" in their solos, we may also think of them as attempting to become "unfettered" from jazz traditions of the solo. Perhaps in no greater way does Baraka find significance in the evocation of "primitive" musicians than in his writing on jazz solo techniques. A prominent topic in his later essay "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," Baraka approaches the solo as a Western invention mastered by musicians of African descent. These musicians, he contends throughout *Blues People* and *Black Music*, derive from a tradition of collective improvisation, yet came to master and push forward a form implemented by others. (This would be a moment to underscore that this kind of synthesis or amalgamation that Albert Murray finds distinctly American. While Baraka doesn't necessarily eschew this logic, there is a definitive tone of disdain in recounting how this change was directed by European influence on blues performance.) Baraka finds the subject matter and approach of blues lyrics to result from the peculiar combination of African rituals, racial enslavement, and a later economic ethos of personal liberty and determinism tied to *laissez faire* economics. "The

insistence of blues verse on the life of the individual and his individual trials and successes on the earth is a manifestation of the whole Western concept of man's life." This phenomenon "could only be found in an American black man's music." The economic and political impulse for individualism related to and, for Baraka, presupposed the emphasis on the musical solo. "The whole concept of the *solo*, of a man singing or playing by himself, was relatively unknown in West African music" (66). This chapter, "Primitive Blues and Classic Blues," works through the mixing of musical traditions on racial lines, being careful to perpetually maintain a racial segregation at the heart of culture these musicians existed in. Though he comments on developments in blues music derived from European musical influence as well as African American musicians rejecting and moving away from these same influences, it is always a specifically *musical* occurrence. Never in his writing on the period of nascent primitive blues does Baraka write about specific moments of musical encounter between musicians of different races, though the development of blues music for him is continually concerned with racial mixing. It is only later in *Blues People* when Baraka is writing about the rise of the recording industry and the emergence of large dance bands will he concede an integration of both style and people. In the post-slavery primitive blues period, which he describes as the roughly fifty year period between the end of the Civil War and the start of the Great Migration (1864 - 1916), Baraka argues that "the Negro's music lost a great many of the more superficial forms it had borrowed from the white man, and the forms that we recognize as blues began to appear" (59). These lines are difficult to navigate, as the previous two quotes seem to be saying slightly different things around the same subjects. First, it has to be noted that these quotes, though from the same section of the text, approach history in different ways. The first quote describes the

early conceptualization of the blues solo, connecting it back to what he sees as the American way of economics and to the influence of white musicians. But what must be stressed is that, for all the talk of an American ethos affecting blues music, this quote is mainly concerned with the musical culture of West Africa prior to enslaved migration. In the second quoted passage (which appears earlier in the chapter), Baraka positions himself within a clear historical framework of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By acknowledging the budding Great Migration, Baraka doesn't make a locational claim, but contextualizes his point in a cultural catalyst that will, in part, be responsible for the dissemination of blues music in the early twentieth century. Though seemingly speaking of a later time than in the earlier quote, Baraka makes no reference to the solo, specifically marking this time as one of cultural insularity that served as an incubator for African American music.

Parsing the differences between these quotes, we find traces of his larger understanding of blues music. Seeking to find musical origins in West Africa and in the US, Baraka's gaze is impossibly vast in both cultural and temporal scope. Taking an empirical approach to Baraka's argument, we may find ourselves in a similar disposition to the *Ethnomusicology* reviewer. While his claim is reductive, ahistorical, and almost ignorant in its deflation of several vibrant musical cultures in the West African region, it may also be the most fruitful in understanding how and where Baraka places collective improvisation as an originary force of blues and jazz music. As stated above, Baraka and Murray share the belief that blues music is a distinctly American form. They differ slightly, but generally coalesce around the idea that the music is derivative of a particular American experience. Baraka is explicit in positing that “[blues] is a native American music; the product of the black man in this country” (17). Murray, for his part,

says “the slaves were making the most effective *synthesis* of all the music material ... they were making the American synthesis ... a kind of aesthetic nationalism” (*Murray Talks Music* 23). The key difference lies in their focus and in where intention or ability are placed. For Baraka, there is a recurrent tension between positing African Americans as the greatest innovators of blues music while also falling prey to adaptations and appropriations by white musicians that they couldn’t control. Murray actually imbues African Americans with a greater degree of agency, noting that even while enslaved black musicians were performing the amalgamation that would affect all folk-derivative music in the United States, most importantly blues music.

Baraka’s two quoted passages, when thought of together, perhaps suggest a deciding difference between his view and Murray’s. By saying that post Civil War African American musicians shrugged off “superficial” contributions made by white musicians, Baraka leaves open the interpretation that the solo was one of these things. This contradicts statements he makes early in “Primitive Blues and Primitive Jazz,” where he says “The shout as much as the African call-and-response singing dictated the form blues took. Blues issued directly out of the shout, and, of course, the spiritual” (62). While there are a few strains of influence at work in this formulation, it can be argued that there is soloing endemic to the “call and response” pattern of religious song, where a soloist / leader introduces a lyric to be either repeated back or responded to by the congregation in an antiphonal relationship. The solo, then, is both imposed upon African-American musicians by white musicians (though Baraka does not say who, and is vague as to when) yet exists in some form in black musical practices. Murray might label this as a moment of synthesis, a place in time where musicians of different races meet and something new, the solo, develops out of the exchange. Baraka chooses instead to frame this as a moment of

encroachment, a development in musical history that, while ultimately beneficial, is propagated on intrusion and trespass.

Though the connection is made explicit in varying degrees across each man's writing, the history of blues performance feels undeniably tied back to religious practice. Following this thread, we may find Baraka and Murray working under this same banner of Murray's "aesthetic nationalism." The "synthesis" described by Murray is spiritual, musical, regional, and racial, carrying through enslavement towards the development of an integrated recording industry. To develop a "nationalist" view of aesthetics must cause these threads to coalesce, as Murray feels blues music represents the whole of which each is a contributing part. Again, his nationalist language is not an effort to glamorize or simplify this history. While Baraka's nationalism was delivered differently, his message actually may exist within the paradigm Murray drafts in his interview with Marsalis. Conversely, many of Murray's central points can comfortably exist within Baraka's economic distinctions between early blues and later jazz. This argument isn't as clean because Murray doesn't discuss economic issues head-on, but when Baraka argues that jazz was the "remaining connection with blues" available to middle class African Americans, and this connection could be made "at many points within the mainstream of American life," we may think back to Murray placing a separation between the "folk idiom" and later music (*BP* 163). It is the transference of access, necessitated by the founding of an industry of commercial exchange and by the ability for black consumers to enter into it, and both writers approach this phenomenon in their singular ways. Still, at its core the argument is about blues music traveling, through the radio waves and through phonographs and by way of migration, and the cultural ramifications of this travel.

Arguments made by Murray and Baraka do not need to neatly fold into one another, nor is it mandatory to find traces of one in the other. However, by doing so we are able to bring together two writers who, if not outwardly opposed to one another in their lifetimes, have been placed in opposition by scholars of significant importance. In a 2016 interview commemorating the publication of Albert Murray's Library of America collection, Henry Louis Gates described first reading Murray in 1970 as feeling like an antidote from a "black ideological bully" such as Amiri Baraka. He goes on to say that "Albert Murray stood for complexity" (Gates and Devlin). That Murray was a complex writer goes without question, but it is in Gates's placing this claim after writing off the "bullies" like Baraka that he seems to be reducing the intellectual seriousness of other kinds of scholarship. This quote should make clear the importance of studying Amiri Baraka's writing and his textual relationship to less "radical" writers like Murray: If we continue to work on assumptions like Gates's, that Baraka could only represent a commandeering, aggressive voice, we remain unable to see how his writing contributes to a larger concern with the legacies of African American music and culture. My reading of Murray and Baraka shouldn't strive to find too much of one writer in the other, but might offer a middle ground on which to view the intellectual overlapping of their work.

These writers represent two major voices at a time when the field of jazz history or jazz criticism was unsure of its past and equally unsure of where it was heading. Though jazz criticism has never, in this country, risen to great societal importance, the 1960s and 1970s saw the great flourishing of critical fervor around jazz music. Writers of various stripes, like Frank Kofsky and the staff writers of *Downbeat* at whom he directed perpetually venom, battled for what it meant to make jazz. At their best, these arguments rose to question what it meant to be an

American. Murray and Baraka did this better than anyone else, asking what it might mean to “sound” American? Each writer sought to find answers in the past, shedding critical light on the earliest African American musical practices. Studying their writing of this period, with Baraka’s contribution coming at the beginning of the free jazz catalyst and Murray’s coming towards the end, we are able to see how each is attempting to square with the music’s history at a moment where the music itself seems to be moving rapidly away from its traditions. It is often said that music criticism always exists away from the music it critiques; that creators and critics move apart from one another so as to never overlap. Murray and Baraka work against this assumption, occupying a place deep within the history of American music.

This extends especially to Baraka, who begins composing music of his own and collaborating with musicians at the nexus of the free jazz movement. As one arc of this project is to reconsider, or to consider for the first time, the interconnectedness of Baraka’s work, we may find Baraka reaching for a better grasp on critical musical history through his recorded music, and vice versa. Always, his artistic, critical, and political work are part of the divergent grasp of African American culture that Baraka is attempting. In *Blues People*, Baraka again seeks to deepen his conception of tradition. To understand the music being created in his present — music, we must remember, he is being paid to review — Baraka turns to the past, opening a vast cultural discussion. He answers the question, “How did we get here, and what does it mean?” by tracking musical development under an umbrella of socioeconomic role playing. By staking his claims around the economic factors that contribute to African American culture and its role in the American mainstream, we are constantly thinking through the class dynamics of music and

how they stand perpetually tied to issues of race. *Blues People* shows how Amiri Baraka doesn't wonder how history sounds, but asserts that history is sound itself.

## Chapter Three

### “Pop pow pow Boom!! The Flame. The Flame.”: Newark 1967, a Textual Riot

I would like to begin with Baraka’s 1969 essay “Meanings of Nationalism:” from his collection *Raise Race Rays Raze*. Baraka is developing a creed for black nationalists that sees him indicting white culture and developing his raced critical voice. Whereas in the previous chapter, where Baraka argues that blues music, as an industry and in its lyrical content, accurately reflected the relationships of white and black Americans throughout its history, by the late 1960s he had begun to push against this same social structure. These moves are facilitated, in part, by reference to other texts, songs, people. Baraka’s use of abbreviations and phonetic spellings are more apparent in this collection, though the style is present in his work at least as early as *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961). As this chapter explores, these linguistic choices begin to assume a role in his multifaceted political activism. Though not always overt in his presentation or clear as to his intention, we have seen Baraka enact systemic objections to “Western” culture that are aimed at the history of philosophy, particularly that of Aesthetics. For these reasons, we may assume he is offering an implicit protest in his refusal to conform with standard conventions of the English language. Though he uses abbreviations and slang throughout his career, he began to increase his usage in the late 1960s. His poetry, prior to this moment and after, expresses a skepticism towards the efficacy of language, desiring to reach an untainted kind of expression. From “Rhythm and Blues (1”): “I have lost / even the act of poetry” (*SOS* 84). From “Guerrilla Handbook”: “trapped in life, knowing no way out / except description” (101). By the time *Black Magic* is published in 1969, Baraka seems to feel that “poetic language” is something different than what he hears and uses in daily life. His poem

“Black Art” expresses that this divide is, among other things, racial. “We want live / words of the hip world live flesh & / coursing blood” (149). These lines express both a feeling of alienation or exclusion from literary society and reveals an attitude of disregard for this other community. The societal critique of “Black Art” works by implicitly claiming poetry has relied on “dead” language that can’t bear on the lives of real people. Again from “Guerrilla Handbook”: “We must convince the living / that the dead / cannot sing” (101). To leave the dead behind and look towards the future, Baraka argues, we must think in fresh yet familiar language that sounds like language people use in conversation.

It is this style that Nathaniel Mackey has called “artistic othering” which he says “has to do with innovation, invention, and change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive” (“Other: From Noun to Verb” 51). This is an active process, or as Mackey says, “*other* is something people do” (51). Mackey’s conception of othering as a shifting variance is opposed to the idea of otherness or the Other as a state of existence. It is to imbue the subject, in our case Baraka, with the agency to affect otherness for himself. It is done for and by oneself, enacted artfully by focusing on one’s self-understanding rather than one’s perception by another. Mackey’s writing does not ignore the fact that this kind of othering happens simultaneously, but his difference to divide the two — “artistic othering” on one hand and “social othering” on the other — gives us the ability to study Baraka’s relationship to traditions of black culture, Western intellectual traditions, and the violence that tie but ultimately divide them from one another.

“Meanings of Nationalism:” is a pointedly direct essay in approach and subject matter: the cultivation of a black nationalist message and the fostering of communities that will grow this. The trick of the pluralized “meanings,” though, works in two ways by celebrating the goals

of nascent black nationalism while being aware of the tools used in the kind of anti-black nationalism of the United States, the same machine that produces Mackey's "social othering". Baraka is explicit in his navigation of the divide between black nationalism and "America first" nationalism that functions on xenophobia and racism. His posture towards theory at this moment may be one of the most perplexing components of his prose. He seems to understand the value of theory and criticism, and is certainly steeped in their histories, but chooses instead to claim he wants to abandon criticism and move beyond theory itself. On theory and theorizing, he writes:

Our theories must be modes of real action not mouthfodder for bullshit sessions. An epoch must be shaped. ... Marx, Donald Duck, Einstein, are all the same source. You *can* learn from them. This source. But to join up with them to liberate the world is bullshit" (RR 104).

To borrow from Audre Lorde, Baraka is aware of the essential inadequacy of using the master's tools. This is not to dismiss them as useless for his ideas, though. Baraka's conception of black nationalism runs deeper, spreading wider by starting from within the mind of each person. His exasperation with the idea of theory, the inevitable gripe of saying a lot but doing nothing, expands outward from a grievance to a take-down of "this source" that is culture writ large. Though he formed *Blues People* around Marxist notions of production, exploitation, and the connections between racism and capitalist labor, he has now written him off. Of course there is humor in Baraka's trio, it is striking to now see the same man call bullshit on Marx. What then, the reader may be asking, should we turn to to chart the liberation of African Americans? When Baraka speaks of "this source," he may intend this to be a critique of whiteness or at least of middlebrow culture. It is to say that even a radical philosophy, if linked to the social construction of whiteness, is inherently flawed. Baraka's logic here is hollow, but that may be intentional. It

would seem ridiculous to cast off Marx, a metonym for traditions in leftist thinking, and Einstein, a metonym for the scientific community, solely because they're white. Baraka's argument does ask the reader to critically engage with his politics but also performs an outrage, an exasperation, with society that uses these metonymic examples to caricature a culture he finds ridiculous. Black nationalism would serve to liberate the culture from cultural moors that didn't represent black people. Again, you would be right to find something ironic about Einstein's theses on quantum mechanics having anything to do with racial politics, but Baraka's point points more to representation than anything else. Baraka appears to lampoon the "great man" historical theory to highlight the overwhelming whiteness of that arc.

Still, Baraka spends more time critiquing what *isn't* black nationalism than defining what it is, and still dances around a solid definition. In the preceding essay to "Meanings," "Black Art, Nationalism, Organization, Black Institutions," seems purposefully vague. Baraka writes, "Nationalism is the beginning sense of who is doing the living. Who is responding. Who is listening to these words, and who created them ... Nationalism? What is it? It is important because it is a basic creative function of the universe" (RR 98). To rephrase a part of Baraka's argument: What is black nationalism? Important. The intention of such opaque writing continues to confound, and begs the question of whether Baraka is making a point through such language or if he's simply writing bad criticism. On the one hand, the performance of anger is useful in that it takes a hard oppositional stance both in viewpoint and argumentative style. On the other hand, if Baraka is trying to cultivate a genuine political platform it would behoove him to stress something more concrete than "who is doing the living."

Combating the critique of black nationalists as “reverse racists” Baraka argues that “It is not hatred that nationalism is about but the development of self” (*RR* 105). The development of the self goes part and parcel with the growth of the black nationalist state, which Baraka envisions as emanating out from each participating person’s world-view. Baraka argues for a societal change that begins within each person, but this personal development is interested in all of black society. You “develop” your person, conceivably adopting styles and tastes against the mainstream of society, in order to elevate the presence of black culture. “The Will, as A People. That is restored. Brought again to us, to shape us, after we, have for so long, been shaped by every other” (103). The movement from the personal / internal mindset into the collective will of black America is unclear here, and perhaps is left untracked to show how Baraka finds one in the other. It is not simply an elision, as Baraka doesn’t seem to find anything dividing these states that must be truncated. “The creation of a Black state. (All levels. It must be the mind, first.) Black Creation is what will free us. It is the act of Creation which is freedom. The clear act of self determination” (107). The implication of this vision means that, if nationalism is a state of mind, one must consciously engage this nationalism. Baraka’s writing can be that tool, as the act of writing is a declaration of self determination. He places an explicit emphasis on the roles of art and artists in the black nationalist project, arguing that writers, painters, musicians, all must remain highly aware of their own political stance. On art and artists, Baraka says that “Art without Nationalism is not Black ... The Negro artist who is not a nationalist at this late date is a white artist, even without knowing it” (98). In light of his references make sense, as each nod to another writer or text creates a lineage with which the reader can engage. By identifying other writers, Baraka is demonstrating who he sees as representative of black nationalist art.

The most clear theoretical linkage Baraka tries to form between himself and the past is his connection to the work of Frantz Fanon. In “Meanings of Nationalism:” Baraka justifies his claim that “racism is not applicable to black people” by informing his reader they should read *Towards the African Revolution* (RR 105). Baraka is doing a surface-level dip into what he sees as a theoretical grounding for his argument, and in that way we should not study Fanon (in this context) for his critical merit but to understand what his work might mean for Baraka here. Fanon’s postcolonial theory should be understood as radically different from the Western traditions that, in part, facilitated the process of colonization. Fanon’s work, which is cognizant of and fluent in the politics of cultural criticism, represents an attractive antecedent for Baraka. It must be stressed that he is drawn to Fanon on a personal level. The importance of Fanon’s presence in Baraka’s essay is to represent a kinship, not just in intellectual disposition but in the personal stakes both writers take in their arguments. Baraka, who frequently employs musical references as grounding, chooses to beckon to Fanon’s theory for these reasons. This appears to suggest an emphasis on who is doing the theorizing, not just how it is being done. As William J. Harris has shown in his criticism of Baraka’s earliest work, the initial influence of white avant-garde poets such as Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg, and Frank O’Hara demonstrated Baraka’s attraction to the inversion of social norms. First appealing to this vision in the white bohemian aesthetic of 1960s Greenwich Village, Baraka sought to further this inversion by understanding how, in America, “simply adding the adjective *black* transforms a concept” (Harris *Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka* 16-17). The lengths to which Baraka approached the

concept of “inversion” in his mixture of theoretical grounding and popular culture suggests that he is attempting to expand the tasks of the authors he cites.

Baraka can use Fanon’s critical voice and intellectual capabilities to experiment with his own, radically different tone. While it isn’t as simple as one following the other, Baraka’s choice to *only* reference Fanon while developing his vernacular critical voice is striking. As Fanon’s work is often remembered for his understanding of language as a racial performance, Baraka’s tonal adaptations in *Raise Race Rays Raze* appear to stand as a corollary to concepts Fanon developed most notably in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Baraka incorporates Fanon to the extent that he can track his claims back to Fanon’s text, but doesn’t attempt to emulate Fanon’s critical style. It is this naming of Fanon, the presence of Fanon’s name in Baraka’s essay, that matters most. The reader who engages “Meanings of Nationalism:” will understand Baraka’s worldview as being largely divided on racial lines. This predominantly functions as an indictment of white cultural figures including Marx, Einstein, “bobby dylan,” and “rolling stone freaks” as those who are diametrically opposed and out of touch with the rest of civilization. It is against these figures that Baraka stacks Fanon, the Miracles, Sidney Poitier, and the founder of Kwanzaa Maulana Karenga. Baraka’s frequent evocations of popular cultural figures such as Poitier and his quoting of black music like that of the Miracles function to envision a black cosmology within which his prose can thrive. By including both “low” and “high” cultural references such as the Miracles and Fanon, Baraka imbues this construction with breadth and depth of meaning. On levels of language and visuality, “Meanings of Nationalism:” sees Baraka utilizing phonetic spellings that seek to emulate verbal behaviors, such as the elongation of exclamations like “WWWOOOOOOOWWWWWWWWYYYEEEEEEEEAAAAHHH,” and his frequent use

of capitalization, underlining for emphasis, and elision to move closer to writing in a vernacular, spoken tone (106). Each of these components of Baraka's writing embody what Nathaniel Mackey calls "troubled" or "othered eloquence." Mackey uses this term in a study of Barbadian poet Edward Braithwaite and pianist Thelonius Monk, but the term applies to Baraka as well. "[Trouble] registers a need for a new world and a new language to go along with it, discontent with the world and the ways of speaking we already have" (*Other* 59). "Trouble" can flow both ways in a study of Baraka: It is both the cultural trouble of violence that Baraka sees afflicting African Americans and it is the troubling of language that Baraka enacts. This dyad is very much in flux as Baraka's linguistic experimentation works with, against, and on the racist violence he sees as supporting American culture.

## Amiri Baraka and the Newark Riots of July 1967

Baraka's linguistic performance of vernacularity bears on how he engaged, literally, with culture in the street. In his decision to write *Raise Race Rays Raze* in this style, Baraka is coupling form with content. The majority of the essays in *Raise Race* deal with the facts of the July 1967 Newark riots, during which Baraka was beaten and arrested by the Newark police. The riots, directly triggered by two police officers beating a cab driver while in custody, were largely blamed on the deindustrialization of the city and simultaneous White Flight. After four days, 26 people had been killed and there were over ten million dollars in damages, some of which remain unrepaired until the present day ("Five Days of Unrest That Shaped, and Haunted, Newark", 2017). Though previously opposed to rioting, Baraka participated in these events and their aftermath as an activist, and furthered their implications with his writing. "From: The Book of Life" and "Newark — Before Black Men Conquered" were composed during or immediately after the events of July 1967 and offer insight into Baraka's chronicle of events and the philosophies he was shaping around them.

*Raise Race Rays Raze* reconstructs the riots of July 1967 through a series of personal narratives mixed with critical essays on the recent history of Newark's government, race relationships in and around the city, and calls for reform in the city government. This study is concerned with Baraka's approach to these issues, namely how he constructs these narratives through sonic descriptions, vernacular language, and the reconstruction of rumors that spread during the riots. The very title of the collection, with a quartet of words that blend together when spoken so as to blur their meanings, is evidence of Baraka's verbal intentions. Like the alterations that occur as a rumor spreads further from its source, speaking the words "Raise race

rays raze” can cause the words to break down into a similar assonance. It is a verbal trick that, by being monosyllabic words that begin with “ra” and end with the assonants “se,” “ce,” “ys,” and “ze,” renders the individual meaning of each word senseless. While this argument is partially undone by the fact that it is a printed title, a study of verballity must begin with this observation. *Raise Race Rays Raze* is a text highlighting racial violence (“race”), the destruction of Newark (“raze”), and focuses around the rebuilding of Newark and the inclusion of black citizens in the city government (“raise”). Each element of the text is present in its title, but they quickly become indistinct as the title is spoken aloud. This might suggest that, for Baraka, these issues are a part of one another, and can only be solved when thought of as a greater whole. Against this, it could also speak to a cynical futility, as the words break down in the same way the city has deteriorated from segregation and deindustrialization.

In this vein, one may consider the collection’s title in relation to Alvin Lucier’s sound art performance piece, “I Am Sitting in a Room.” Lucier, a Boston-based composer, first performed “I Am Sitting in a Room” in 1969, concurrent to Baraka’s work on *Raise Race Rays Raze*, which contains writing from before and after the riots and was first published in 1972. The composition is a durational work where Lucier recites a monologue into a microphone, explaining to the listener how he will loop the monologue back through the microphone until the words break down into the frequencies of his speech. Lucier uses the reverberations of the room he is in to affect the destruction of his speech, which goes from a clear recitation to a series of distorted, harmonic tones. By the conclusion of the performance (I am using a 1981 recording released by Lovely Music) the listener can only hear a wavering drone. The performance is completed when the opening monologue has been rendered beyond the point of recovery or recognition. I do not

wish to claim Lucier's performance directly influenced Baraka or to claim legitimacy through a historical counterpart, but I believe the breakdown of language to be an idea Baraka would be moved by. A writer with a keen sense of vocal performance, a musician in his own right, Baraka may have considered the title to have a metaphorical dimension to it, as his own linguistic breakdowns mirror the riots of 1967. While it is an imaginative leap, it may be fitting for a writer such as Baraka, who so often mixes a clear love of language with an apparent death wish for its structures and conventions.

Returning to the Newark Riots, I will visit several moments in *Raise Race Rays Raze* where Baraka attempts to "hear" the events he is describing, using sonic descriptors, onomatopoeias, and vernacular language. In these moments, the reader must ask herself how these events would have sounded, performing an aural reconstruction of the events. I enter into the riots of 1967 through Baraka, though soon leave his work to draw a wider view of the textual field. Using government documents and articles published in *Time*, I attempt to orient these sources into a cohesive network. I find that each source — *Time*, documents published in the Kerner Commission report, and Baraka's prose — show a tendency to understand, or ask their reader to understand, the riots by how they sounded. When I propose an understanding of "sound," I specifically mean the presence of gunfire, property destruction, community-wide verbal altercations, and the dissemination of rumor throughout Newark's black community. Leading with an interest in sonic reconstruction I leave open the ability to reconceptualize the chosen sources as unified if only by their tendency to think sonically.

When Newark city police officers arrested and beat cab driver John Smith on July 12, 1967, they triggered a chain of events that would shake the city, and the nation, to its core. Over the next five days, confrontations between residents of Newark's Central Ward, the historical hub of the city's black urban life, and police officers from the mostly white, predominantly Italian police department would cause millions of dollars in damages and leave 26 people dead (McLaughlin 6). Though the unrest was in response to Smith's arrest, the events of July 1967 represented the tipping point for years of dissatisfaction within Newark's black community about the violation of civil liberties and the lack of economic opportunities within the city while the predominantly white suburbs grew in size and political influence. Nationally, Newark was seen as one of multiple "race riots" to have occurred in the "long, hot summers" of the middle 1960s. The Harlem riots of 1964, with the Little Fruit Stand Riot in April and the larger riots of July after the shooting of a fifteen year old African American man, and the Watts riots in Los Angeles the following August were on the minds of everyone when protesters began to assemble after Smith's arrest. Following Newark were major riots in Detroit, Milwaukee and Rochester, New York among other places, causing the federal government to address urban inequalities and the growing racial divisions of the country. These events would be the catalyst for President Lyndon Johnson's formation of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission after the group's leader Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois. The violence in Newark and elsewhere caused the federal government to address the fact that, as the Kerner report stated, "white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it" (Kerner).

Black Power had arrived in Newark before the events of July, 1967, but its presence and meaning in the city's history afterward would be undeniable. Black Power, as Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton would say in their *Black Power* (1967), was about "why, where, and in what manner black people in America must get themselves together" (xv). A cultural aesthetic expression as much as a political ideology, Black Power attempted to invigorate oppressed communities who felt that the mantras of Civil Rights were moving too slowly, or not at all. Above all, Black Power was a declaration of existence, of self-determination. As Ture and Hamilton write: "Our basic need is to reclaim our history and our identity from what must be called cultural terrorism, from the depredation of self-justifying white guilt. We shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, and to have these terms recognized" (34-35). The language of terror and recognition carry significant weight in the context of the Newark riots, where the divisions between police and dissenting civilians carried a racial dichotomy. Though there were certainly white protesters and black police officers, the dominant narrative of the riots was the suburban white population on the side of the police, and the urban poor of Newark's ghetto on the other.

Amiri Baraka's racial nationalism was a significant part of this equation. His artistic work with Spirit House, a site for Black Nationalists in the city and the home of Baraka's theater troupe, the Spirit House Movers, allowed Baraka to continue developing his mixture of public art and direct action. Like the failed Black Arts Repertory Theater and School (BARTS) that he founded while in Harlem, Baraka sought to engage the black community through education initiatives and artistic activism. In Newark, this vision would grow into the Committee For

Unified Newark (CFUN), a tripartite that encapsulated Spirit House, Black Community Defense and Development, a group based in East Orange, New Jersey that taught martial arts, and United Brothers, the most overtly political arm of CFUN that sought to wield Black Power for political gains (Matlin 105). Though beginning prior to summer 1967, the July riots were a catalyst for Baraka's increased political activity and went hand in hand with his emerging Black Nationalist writing. His own participation in the riots, where he was beaten by police and arrested for allegedly carrying two unregistered revolvers, mixed with the artistic celebrity he had already achieved prior to 1967 allowed Baraka to rise as a prominent activist for political change in Newark. The ability for activists and political candidates such as Amiri Baraka, Earl Harris, and future mayor of Newark Kenneth Gibson to convert the anger synthesized by the Newark riots into real political change has caused Kevin Mumford to write that "the rise of municipal empowerment proved to be the legacy of Black Power in the post-civil rights era" (199).

The events of July 1967 and their after effects have been well documented.

Comprehensive histories of these riots have been written by Kevin Mumford and Malcolm McLaughlin and several films, most notably Göran Ollson's *Black Power Mixtape, 1967-1975*, adequately sketch the social and cultural histories unfolding in and around Newark in 1967. I would like to further localize the study of the Newark riots to the work of Amiri Baraka, seeking to understand how the riots appeared in his writing. I hope to raise the question of, how Baraka creates a textual riot? What does it mean for one to actively rebel in, and through, text? This study will move the emphasis away from Baraka's grassroots political activism towards his written work to argue that, for Baraka, the racial rebellion imagined by Black Power and after Newark 1967 was significantly textual. The convergence of riot and Baraka's revolutionary

writing, including *Raise Race Rays Raze* (1969), *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969), and *Black Magic* (1969) raises questions as to the preservation of history and of memory. His writing, coupled with media coverage of the events in Newark and later historiographic studies of the riots each attempts to imagine what revolution might sound like. Moreover, they position the Newark riots as being a sonic disruption, one that blurred the language of power with vernacular expression. This study will engage texts as being capable of sonic preservation. To borrow from Baraka, himself borrowing from Louis Armstrong, I want to ask “How you sound??” when you make revolution (*New American Anthology* 424).

He concludes “Book of Life” with a sign off, dating its composition and locating its writer: “Essex County Jail / Summer 1967 / Year of Rebellion” (55). Baraka dating his introduction to “Newark — Before Black Men Conquered” in 1970 writes, “This essay was written shortly after the rebellion of 1967. It was submitted to *Atlantic* and several other periodicals but turned down. Most of its accusations have now, of course, proven out. ... the title seems truly prophetic” (58)! In each case, Baraka is keenly aware of a metanarrative that he can use to begin to shape the Newark Riots. He clearly exhibits a desire to approach these events as something epochal. Working against a popular assumption of riots as being moments of unrest marked by looting, vandalism, and violent hedonism, Baraka instead argues that there is something being remade — that there is a racial glory at play. The language of conquerors and upheaval, evident in Baraka’s choice of describing the events as a “rebellion” rather than a riot, binds much of *Raise Race Rays Raze* together. We as readers can not know if Baraka actually composed “Book of Life” in a jail cell following his arrest, but it is an attractive image that would exhibit both a feeling of potent anger and preternatural foresight. It is a sign-off that

beckons to Martin Luther King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." The similarity may have less to do with argumentative overlap than with Baraka wanting to position himself in an active leadership role in the burgeoning movement. It can be noted though, that while Baraka certainly doesn't identify with King's message of nonviolent direct action, "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" does exemplify a similar mantra of developing a political ideology through an increasingly spatial lens. King, using the apostles for grounding, writes that he is "cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King). As Baraka himself is aware when he sees his "accusations ... proven out" his writing is concerned with rectifying and preserving a narrative of what happened in Newark. Still, "Book of Life" is cognizant of a higher kind of thinking, not concerned with boots-on-the-ground activism but envisioning a perpetual rebellion beginning in Newark and emanating across the country. While there were many riots to follow, they don't necessarily cohere with the unignorable romance with which Baraka concludes his essay. Both essays are marked by Baraka's use of repetition, cultural reference, and typographical variation as described above. "Book of Life" is a mixture of essayist prose, enjambed verse, and symbology, as Baraka incorporates Egyptian hieroglyphs as visual breaks and, occasionally, to complete sentences (51). Written while held in county jail on charges of possessing two .32 caliber pistols on July 14, the third day of the riots ("LeRoi Jones Seized in Newark After Being Hurt", 1967), "From: The Book of Life" is an afro-futurist manifesto whose scope far exceeds the circumstances of its composition. Baraka's essay pins black creation and black religious experience, as embodied by Allah and Shango, against the "Devils" and "greys" of white society. He envisions a pan-thesistic

holy war being waged on the streets of American cities. “On the roofs the marksmen of Shango and Allah look down and judge the dancers” (54), Baraka writes, riffing on the claims that there were black marksmen shooting Newark officials during the riots, a claim he calls into question in “Newark,” where he asks, “can anyone prove such a thing as a Black sniper exists” (76)?? Both works use themes of trouble as Mackey imagines it, seeking to reach a new understanding, a new culture, through the pursuit of trouble. Mackey’s concept of trouble as a threshold to pass through en route to something greater is akin to Baraka’s vision of the riot. The city must burn and will burn again. The question, now stated as a demand, is who will be there to rebuild it.

As in “Meanings of Nationalism:” Baraka works in small revolutions. Meaning, the revolution must be internalized as black citizens first understand themselves to be their own leaders, those who are willing to embrace self-love as an avenue to self-understanding and fulfillment. He calls this change in leadership a cultural “blackening,” a step forward that is really the rightful return to a previous order disturbed by colonialism and slavery (49). While in jail, Baraka imagines the riots as being capable of triggering a larger societal upheaval, a racial die-off where “the white races are a last raw turn before the stretching and reaching of return recycle evolutionary movement Black” (51). Baraka’s conception of time, wherein the past and future overlap in the present, informs his choice of “evolution” over “revolution”. It is a progression forward, a recycling of forms on an epochal level. “Book of Life” casually jumps across centuries and continents to conjure this image of black people (re)learning what was always contained within themselves. “So be it the Black Man must learn himself. Relearn who he is. His origins. His powers. His destiny” (50). It may be appropriate to label Baraka’s hermeneutics a kind of (r)evolutionary manifestation of identity. The progression forward, the

development of black leaders and a robust — that is a non-persecuted — black society, all hinges on a radical reclamation of origins.

As “Book of Life” reminds us, no matter how abstract or experimental these arguments may get, they must persistently beckon back to the riots. The relationship between Baraka’s theory and the present of the composition (that is, his incarceration) attempts to maintain a clear association with the events at hand. While Baraka goes through several dense and theoretically expansive arguments in these essays, they are obliged to remind the reader that each argument is a direct response to events on the streets of Newark. Returning to a wider historical arc, I want to temporarily move away from Baraka. Drawing on previously mentioned studies, I here begin to consider how disparate sources are entwined with Baraka’s prose through their argumentative strategies.

Considerations of sonority within the riot must attend to the base facts of actions. We must consider that the actions and reactions of warring groups caused and made noise. In the course of five days, law enforcement officers discharged an estimated 13, 326 rounds of ammunition (Mumford 125). While 26 people were killed and 1,100 sustained injuries of varying intensities and from various sources, the vast majority of these bullets missed their human targets. Much of this shooting can be attributed to a fear, on the side of the police, of black snipers. The presence of these snipers has remained a hotly contested issue in the study of the riots, with Amiri Baraka writing “For every so-called sniper’s bullet, the police issued 1000 rounds ... Yet where were the snipers?? ... Most of the sniper stories were started by devils to legitimate their murdering” (*RR* 76). The roles of rumor and hysteria, factors directly attributable to community talk, in the growth of the sniper paranoia appears in multiple studies of the riots,

from Baraka's own recollection in "Newark — Before Black Men Conquered" to the narrative gathered for the Kerner Commission. While the fear was of an amorphous, bodiless but yet still raced sniper, the cause and perpetuation of this fear was sonic. The Kerner Commission report recounts one origin story for the sniper that is a self-fulfilling fantasy of gun fire where the fear of shooting begets more shooting. The report says:

Since everything appeared quiet and it was broad daylight, [Director of Police Dominick] Spina walked directly down the middle of the street. Nothing happened. As he came to the last building of the complex, he heard a shot. All around him the troopers jumped, believing themselves to be under sniper fire. A moment later a young Guardsman ran from behind a building.

The Director of Police went over and asked him if he had fired the shot. The soldier said yes, he had fired to scare a man away from his window; that his orders were to keep everyone away from windows.

Spina said he told the soldier: "Do you know what you just did? You have now created a state of hysteria. Every Guardsman up and down this street and every state policeman and every city policeman that is present thinks that somebody just fired a shot and that it is probably a sniper (Kerner).

The apparition of the sniper, the rumor come to life in the body of this nameless, presumably black man attends to the mortal issues of this kind of sounding. As McLaughlin writes, the concept of the sniper "signified a concealed, faceless adversary" whose presumed black maleness made him both "hidden" and "indistinguishable" from others in Newark's Central Ward (113). The unnamed Guardsman shoots, he says, in order to keep this person away from the window. To make this explicit, he shoots to keep this person away from a position where he can shoot at the police. But the fear and hysteria Spina describes is not for the bullet fired (note how the shot is discharged seemingly at nothing, how its lack of intended direction causes it to disappear) but the sound of the shot.

Contemporary news reports of the riots frequently used similar language to describe the scene by how it sounded. “Sparks and Tinders,” the first article about the Newark riots written for *Time*’s July 21, 1967 issue used overwhelmingly aural adjectives to describe the violence as well as to define the actors at the center of the conflict. “Rocks and bottles” are heard “clattering” against the walls of the police headquarters, while broken glass is “tinkling” on the sidewalks when the looting begins (“Sparks and Tinders” 19). The article’s author goes so far as to invoke the language of musical theory, describing the chants of the protesters — “beat drums, not heads,” itself a zeugma incorporating brutality and musical practice in opposition — as a “counterpoint” to the sounds of looting and gunfire. Again, the fear of sniper fire appears, at least partially, as a sonic phenomenon. “Sparks and Tinders” describes sniper rounds “spang[ing]” off the sidewalk. While this kind of descriptive language is not singular to this article, one must again consider the ramifications of sounds in this context. The sounds of the riot — chants, screams, gunshots and whispers — permeate government documents, *Time*’s reporting, and Baraka’s essay. Each text can be thought of as an archive of sound; a trio of documents that, however different in their means and ends, each express an interest in preserving the sounds of July 1967 however they imagined them to be heard. Choices made by the *Time* journalist therefore enact an extension of the scene in Newark. The function of journalistic retelling is particularly delicate here, as the writer is not only recapitulating but is now constructing the scenario itself. For the reader to understand the sounds of Newark, the writer must conjure their textual equivalent. As the idea of a “textual equivalent” is inherently flawed, this underscores how the tension between bearing witness to events in real time and translating this to writing gives birth to an alternative; the first and now-dominant narrative of what happened and how it

sounded. The written document doesn't only preserve the sounds, but expands for the first time one's perception of the events.

The idea of "hearing" contained within "Sparks and Tinder" functions both to sketch the riot's soundscape — gunshots, chants, shattered glass — and to show how rumor underscores the growth of the Newark riots. After the arrest and assault of John Smith — who, in a touch of racial sonic language is first described as "a trumpet-playing Negro cab driver"— the escalation of the civilian reaction is attributed to the spread of rumors. After residents of Hayes House, a predominantly Black public housing development, saw Smith being brought into the police station, the author writes how "Out over the cabbies' crackling VHP radio band went the rumor that white cops had killed a Negro driver" ("Sparks and Tinder" 19-26). Crowds grew in number protesting the rumored murder, though they were initially easily suppressed. After three hours, however, "Along the ghetto grapevine, the word was passed: 'You ain't seen nothin' yet'" ("Sparks"). As I will show later, *Time's* coverage of the riots of 1967, in Newark and elsewhere, frequently utilized sonic descriptions and racial vernacular together to achieve an image of urban resistance to police authority that accentuated racial divisions through oft-stereotypical or reductive language. The attention to the "street speech" of some unattributed but assumed black speaker, "you ain't seen nothin' yet," paired with the alliterative "ghetto grapevine," emulates in text an insular community of racial solidarity that is speaking to one another about a member of that community in the language at that community's disposal. While the reader should remark on the stereotypical imagery used by the writer, this language does inadvertently offer a grounding for claims of the racial avenues through which information may flow. It is worth noting how the rumor is said to spread across radio waves. If this is true, we begin to understand this network of

cab drivers to act as veins of communication within the community. As the message travels across radio waves, there is a line of ‘invisible,’ distanced communication. There is a gap in communication that the journalist doesn’t comment on — how and when did this message leave the airwaves and spread through conversation? That is, when did cab drivers tell other people, and who did they tell? Dormant within this one anecdote of “Sparks and Tinder” is a complex exchange of community information. While the story notes that it is residents of Hayes House, the housing complex across from the police precinct, who first remark on Smith’s arrest, it is the cab radio that disseminates information around the community. From one to the next, though, the rumor has already grown to be a murder story. The spatial expansion of the rumor, its inventions, the mediation from eye-witness to radio report to spoken rumor; each element of the complex birth of the rumor lay hidden in the account we are given from *Time*. The speech of the community is not actively present in the story, but an imaginative reading of how this information spread and grew allows us to guess at what was occurring.

“Sparks and Tinder” includes very few quotes directly attributed to anyone involved in the riots, with the majority of these quotes being from members of the Newark Police Department. John Smith, who is described as having “a collection of 25 ‘cool’ jazz records, and is saving for a plate to replace his missing front teeth,” is only quoted once as saying: “I got to tighten up my upper register and study a little harmony” (“Sparks”) (My emphasis). The disregard by the *Time* writer of including any reflection from Smith on his arrest, paired with its recurring interest in his musical hobbyism, circles around his ability to produce sound without allowing him a platform on which to speak of the events that unfolded around his arrest. Not only does the description of Smith as toothless skirt a racial caricature, the fact that he remains

toothless because he apparently cannot afford not to be underscores an economic critique that imagines Smith as parochial. “Sparks and Tinders” constantly reminds its reader of Smith’s ability to breathe, to speak, to produce sounds. The quote on musical practice, though an aside, doubly attends to Smith’s verbal, and literally oral, life. He is speaking out of his mouth, a mouth that is missing front teeth, about his desire to improve his “upper register” in order to improve the oral hobby of trumpet playing. Smith’s comment refers to his embouchure, the collective use of lip and jaw muscles, tongue, and breath that one must maintain in order to produce sound through a brass instrument. To improve one’s upper register, they must be able to buzz their lips at a higher velocity, while directing a more pinched flow of air through the shaft of the trumpet mouthpiece. Smith’s passion for the trumpet, the sounds he likes to listen to that inspire his playing, his missing front teeth, the contortions of his face and of his breath that form his embouchure: All of these elements seek to coalesce in a portrait of John Smith, a textual image of the man that the reader can see and hear. The reader of “Sparks and Tinders,” however, has already seen John Smith. His portrait, slightly in profile, fills the cover of the July 21, 1967 edition of *Time*, overlaid with a banner reading, “Anatomy of a Race Riot” (*Time*). In this black and white photograph, Smith’s gaze is directed towards the lower left corner of the frame. He looks weary, focused, and intense as if he is in the midst of a trying effort. The angle at which the photograph is taken draws the viewer’s attention to Smith’s prominent left jaw, sloping towards the mouth “Sparks and Tinders” spends so much time addressing. Smith’s mustache and goatee, an aesthetic often synonymous with “hipster” styles of the day (think of Eric Dolphy’s composition “Hat and Beard” from the 1964 album *Out To Lunch*) is given attention by the play of light and dark in the image. While his jaw and neck are darker, Smith’s nose and mouth are in

the most well-lit portion of the photograph. This focus on the mouth is extended by the photo's caption, "Newark Cab Driver John Smith," being placed directly to the left of his mouth. The original image, held in the Bettmann Archive of Getty Images, has a wider focus and includes Smith's lawyer, Oliver Lofton. The image, titled "Cab Driver John Smith With Attorney" and taken on July 14 when he was released from police custody, is captioned to explain that Smith is speaking with reporters outside of the Newark Courthouse. In this, the original photo then taken by *Time* for their cover, the intensity of focus on Smith's profile is far less clear. Though he is the predominant subject of the photograph, it is only the *Time* cover that moves closer to Smith's mouth. In contrast to the perhaps organic exposure of the Getty image, the *Time* cover is significantly under exposed, accounting for the dramatic chiaroscuro of the cover image.

Within a story that, for the arguments of this chapter, serves to show the relationship between verballity, rumor, and sounding and the translation to text, this fixation on Smith is remarkable. When we approach "Sparks and Tinder" in this framework, the study of Smith builds an image of him doing all it can to deliver an image that can make noise for the reader. There is, obviously, an impossibility to this idea, but consider the factors previously laid out: Quotations of Smith speaking, and speaking about exercising the muscles of his lips and jaw; the concentration on his musical hobbies over anything else (we gain a clearer picture of Smith's mouth than his battered body after the abuse received from Newark Police); the cropped image of Smith to bring his face into greater relief. Within the ongoing study of rumor and speech performance, consider how these discursive moves enhance our understanding of Smith. Each does their part in building our understanding of Smith through sound, or the capability of producing sound. The words he says, the mouth out of which speech comes, the albums and

musical styles Smith prefers to hear, each serve the reader's understanding of Smith. The author has exhibited their attention to sound in the descriptive choices they make for the reader. While "Sparks and Tinder" is riddled with problematic language, these decisions necessitate an inventive reader that works around and through these issues. Rather than moving passively through the language of the piece, we must attempt interpretive leaps that can expand the limiting language the article falls back on. This is not to suggest there is, somewhere, some "perfect" text that doesn't require an active and imaginative reader, but to say that this reading, and those that follow work from an assumption of textual limitation.

## Rumor and the Newark Riots

As the *Time* article shows, rumors became a catalyst for violence in Newark. In fact, “Sparks and Tinder” expands the power of the rumor to eclipse, or at least match, the issues of racial violence and police misconduct already plaguing the city. The author of “Sparks and Tinder” does not dwell on any consideration of what it might mean to focus their account around the rumor of John Smith’s murder and how it spread, leading with the rumor-as-origin before exploring issues of black disenfranchisement and segregation as a way to perhaps offer a pathway to exploring how disenfranchised citizens are socialized. The effect of showcasing rumor essentially extends the rumor’s power. It is important to note that rumor *does* play a crucial role in riots, and was a central cause for the initial confrontations between police and civilians. The danger is in failing to realize *how* rumors are at work in Newark, and how they call attention to and may effectively extend racial violence. Central to this study of Newark’s rumors is the contention that, again, this is an instance of social talk. Across radios and in the streets, members of Newark’s Central Ward and elsewhere are expanding the story of Smith’s arrest across many interweaving matrices of social networks within the black community.

The tragic power of the rumor of John Smith’s murder at the hands of the police is it wouldn’t be anything new. It is this sad fact that causes us to recognize the rumor not as fantasy but as a revision of reality capable of containing as much truth as the actual situation. In his study *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, Donald Horowitz traces the role rumor has played in numerous ethnic riots across global societies in several centuries. Though primarily focusing on violence among religious extremists, Horowitz’s study may offer insight into the rumors of Newark, if only to show the similarities between Newark and other atrocities that have more readily been

labeled “ethnic violence.” In the majority of the examples cited by Horowitz, the rumor kindled anger that moved in the same direction as the violence that followed. Meaning, if a rumor was spread of violence by Hindu nationalists in India against the members of the Muslim minority, this would lead to a violent counter-attack from the Muslim community in response to the rumored act, whether substantiated or not. This is not as neatly demonstrated in an example such as Newark, where the rumor alleges violence by the State. Though the alleged violence was by two police officers, John DeSimone and Vito Pontrelli, the police eventually would kill 24 people in the ensuing riots. One white police officer, Frederick Toto, and a white firefighter were killed, with the other 24 deaths being men, women, and children of color. In this light, it may be useful to consider the ethnic implications of the riots, or at least to see how they were understood through this lens, whether rightly or wrongly.

Newark does not meet Horowitz’s criteria for being called ethnic violence. He labels the events of Newark and other urban violence of the 1960s as “violent protests” for the fact that “ghetto violence” “aims only at property destruction and defiance of authority” (20). One need not look any further than Amiri Baraka, however, to find that the goals or meanings found in the destruction of Newark were not simply to loot. Baraka understands violence in Newark to be part of a greater struggle against oppression generally. It is to break from the dominant expectation to receive help from government aid and civic societies, as he believes it is “stupid to seek justice from the unjust, from the murderer” (*RR* 77-78). For Baraka, the riots are a response to the systematic destruction of black communities in Newark, as white politicians funnel money out of the city to benefit the burgeoning white suburbs. For Baraka, all that is left is “[a city] where our children cannot even spell their own names, our cities with torn down shacks full of vermin and

disease, these cities we must now take control of, in order to live” (*RR* 78). While looting undoubtedly occurred, we must look past these actions to understand the profound implications Baraka seemed to find in the violence of the riots.

As Kevin Mumford has shown, Newark’s community was staunchly segregated along ethnic divisions, with the Italian community, which itself had only recently been coded as “white,” comprising almost the entire police force. With the development of suburbs around Newark following World War Two, the city’s black population emerged as the majority while political control was almost totally held by white suburbanites. Mumford cites a 1971 graph showing the percentage of black police officers in thirty departments around the country, including Newark, New York, Detroit, and other cities with near-overlapping riots. Newark Police Department only employed 225 black officers, fifteen percent of the department, in a city that was reportedly fifty four percent black at the time. These statistics put Newark significantly behind other cities with majority black populations, including Washington, Atlanta, and Gary, Indiana. In Gary, the city with the nearest percent of black residents at 52.8, 31 percent of the police force was black (Mumford 203). It also must be noted that, in post-1967 Newark, there began an expansive shift of representation and of the political norms. Mumford’s study “Black Power in Newark” demonstrates how the election of Kenneth Gibson in 1970 over Hugh Addonizio, the Italian-American mayor who was largely blamed for the riots by the black community, began a period of embracing and celebrating the city’s black and brown communities who were previously shunned and violated. As Mumford explains, “the ceremonial and civic construction of ethnicity that animated municipal politics shifted in meaning, including for the first time the public expression of an African-American presence” (206). This is all to cite

the 1971 graph, published in *Ebony*, with an asterisk. While the number of black police officers in Newark appears to be a hotly contested statistic (The *Time* author cites “city officials” claiming to employ “some 400 negroes”), it is valuable to understand how the *Ebony* graph might downplay the severity of Newark’s segregation at the time of the riots. “Sparks and Tinder” explains how the Newark Police Department didn’t employ “any Negro police officers above the rank of lieutenant before [the riots] (when Addonizio hastily ordered a Negro officer promoted to captain)” (“Sparks and Tinder”). This action, if true, marries Mumford’s ideas of “the ceremonial and the civic,” as Addonizio attempts to save face with the appointment to a position within the police hierarchy implicitly coded to be reserved for whites.

## Vernacular and the Written Rumor

The confluence of these facts appears to demonstrate entrenched ethnic divisions within the City government and in the urban layout of Newark. It is the creation of ethnic enclaves and the structural and social politics that enact their divisions and allow for rumors to spread. In fact, in the disenfranchised community within a city working against it, rumors and other modes of communication may function as alternatives to “public” lines of communication such as news media and/or information disseminated by local government. The rumor, in fact, could run against the government-provided information, and the presence of a popular rumor could prove to be a reason for the government producing a narrative. Fear and dislike of the state are built into the need to spread a rumor, as this chain of communication exists against dominant, one-directional modes of communication. This is certainly true of the rumor of John Smith’s murder, and bears a majority of the weight of the paranoia around black snipers held by law enforcement. It must be remembered, however, that these ethnic divisions weren’t “literally” true. Though the city was fiercely sectional, the conflicting statistics from *Ebony* and *Time* allow for the fact of black officers being employed in some capacity. Tacit in Baraka’s depiction of the riots in central Newark as “totally black” against the “Ginnies” and “Whitey” is the fact that there were white citizens who supported the expansion of civil rights and white people present at the actions of July 1967 (RR 60-61). The effort to understand the duality of this situation, that it was described in racially divided language of “us vs. them” (whoever the “us” might be depended upon the author), allows us to understand Newark 1967 as both confirming and breaking Horowitz’s standards for ethnic violence. While Baraka’s image of the riots might directly evoke Horowitz’s thinking on the difficulty of theorizing about riots because “[rioters’]

conceptions are very much at odds with those of many theorists, for whom group boundaries are problematic, fluid, mutable, even manipulable” (43), it is worth remembering that Horowitz dismisses Newark as simply ethnic violence because “property damage was in the hundreds of millions of dollars, but the death toll was relatively low” (20). While it may run counter to Horowitz’s theoretical disposition, it may be beneficial to recover the nuances of the riot from these limiting definitions. The difference between this argument and the sociological argument presented by Horowitz’s text is that, in the case of Amiri Baraka / Newark, I am attempting to legitimate and elevate the ideas, desires, and intentions of the events that unfolded. These thoughts have been forgotten because of the very real systemic issues that the riots opened up and never truly fixed. The city never fully recovered, with abandoned structures still present. The boiling up of anger over increased deindustrialization, the Newark Riots all but ensured the further departures of factories in the city.

Attempting to study Newark as an ethnic riot through a text that denies its status as such draws attention to the roles naming and textual interpretation play in the history of these events. It forces us to confront the various kinds of “wrong” in literature of this event, from Amiri Baraka to *Time*. Questions over a text’s appropriateness, its incorporation considering its potentially lethal irresponsibility in claims and sources, ask the reader to label various discursive decisions as “right” or “wrong.” Such as in the example of statistics of the Police Department’s diversity, where the truth of the question lingers somewhere between the sources yet remains unpinnable for any one hoping to find a single answer to cite. Similar questions must be brought to bear on the role of rumor in Newark, and the role rumors play within the *Time* reporting. Across these two instances runs the line of mediation between sound and text, where the verbal

rumor gains the ear of the writer, who initiates their own kind of hearing via transcription and publication. The sounds of the rumor are confirmed by “Sparks and Tinder,” though they are also forever altered. By becoming textual, the rumors become historical and archivable. In this change the rumor becomes rewired as it is stripped of its spatial / ethnic uniqueness and becomes a piece of newsprint, the textual disembodiment of sound. Still, as we will see, *Time* demonstrates an interest in preserving this sound, or at least demonstrates an awareness of the alteration it enacts by consuming the rumor in text. This is a process that is significantly racial.

As Stephen Best has shown, simply becoming aware of a rumor through text produces a message wholly different than what was initially intended in the communication. The very evidence of the written rumor becomes proof of the rumor’s failure. The breach of “illicit utterance” the written rumor represents “radiate[s] with a sense of historical impossibility” (115). This “impossibility” emerges from the tensions between rumor and fact as well as speech and writing. Rumors extend themselves through the improvisatory variances that are inherent to their structure. With the horizontal growth (across or through a group of people) comes the vertical growth, the inflation of the story through multiple remixes and manipulations. Modalities of intensity and extensity engage in a direct relationship with the distance from the rumor’s source (bearing in mind that “having a source” is almost impossible to determine, and could possibly be another rumor itself). In this schema, the straight line cutting diagonally through Quadrant One of the Cartesian graph cuts through “Inflation / Growth of the Rumor” on the y-axis and “Distance from the Rumor’s Point of Origin” on the x-axis. The point at which the rumor becomes written and / or archived could represent a flat-lining effect, as the rumor and its afterlives become an object of empirical study rather than a narrative into which a person may

enter. Once it is written, questions over truth and fiction are given greater attention. Rather than displaying an interest in extending the story, the written rumor begins to face backwards in a study of itself. It has gone from an object of play to an object of study. In this way, doubt and retrospection creep in. There is a poignant difference between being told a rumor and doubting its validity and studying the rumor and wondering its trajectories. As Best recognizes, “once a rumor makes it into the archive, it becomes hard to believe it was ever a rumor at all” (115)

Though it might represent the rumor’s “failure,” the archivization of the rumor does not bring about its death. By framing a large portion of its narrative around the rumor of Smith’s murder, “Sparks and Tinder” impels the rumor to engage with a construction of truth/reality different from the environment in which the rumor initially percolated. This change is responsible for the retrospective doubt or irony present in Best’s thinking on the state of the archived rumor. As the rumor becomes the crux of the *Time* article, it is interacting with, if not directly than contextually, processes of determining truth and prescribing validity in a writing practice called nonfiction. Even while a listener might question the authenticity of a rumored statement, this is still a pleasurable skepticism. The listener might doubt what they’ve heard but choose to pass it on because it's entertaining, absurd, or alarming. The mechanics of truth, then, operate at different frequencies across these modes of circulation. As a spoken act, the very possibility of the rumor’s untruth may warrant its circulation, while the journalistic counterpart seeks to evince truth in order to justify circulation. To be clear, “Sparks and Tinder” is not extending the content of the rumor. It is not claiming that John Smith was murdered. (This is obvious because, as shown above, Smith was interviewed by *Time*.) What it does do, however, is attempt to extend the spirit of the rumor, the essence of its dissemination, by way of its

reproduction. The *Time* article attempts a kind of vernacular reproduction that betrays a self-awareness of its own failure. Using unattributed quotes and vernacular performance, *Time*'s reporting of the riots offers nameless, bodiless quotations that are still raced. As sound must become text, the writer demonstrates a desire to preserve the "authentic" voice of the community. Any gesture towards speech, then, puts forth a racial politics that asks and assumes the ways in which a person can perform their blackness in a way a reader can understand.

It is equally important to understand what "Sparks and Tinder" doesn't do; what it remains unable to accomplish for the same reasons and by the same means as how it is able to archive the rumor. The written rumor only represents a partial truth. Partial both because of the facts of its presentation — that the rumor was not generated or spread with the goal of being published in *Time* — and by the facts of its presentation as a textual object. While Best rightfully labels the written rumor a "failure to remain illicit utterance," the case of the John Smith rumors both confirms and subverts this failure. While we come to learn of the rumors by way of the text — whether "Sparks and Tinders" or Baraka's "Newark — Before Black Men Conquered" or the Kerner Commission report — there remains an essentially unknowable other life of these rumors. "Sparks and Tinder" does acknowledge the rumor "that white cops had killed a Negro driver" (*Time*), but it can't begin to shed light on the elusive other narrative trajectories or fantastic discursions this story may have taken on the night of July 12, 1967. The written rumor is a translation as well as a distillation of truth. This distillation brings the reader an unadorned "truth," as in, "this is what was said by members of the black community after Smith was arrested and before the riots began." At the same time, it can be read as a reduction from something we as readers couldn't have ever possessed as it existed within strict boundary lines of

spatial and emotional intimacy. This might represent the rumor's inability to be archived. It is to suggest that the powerful extension across matrices of communication in the community can never truly be captured. It is both a hopeful testimonial to verbatim's obdurate denial to be archived but a recognition of the verbal's relegation to second-tier status beneath the dual power of the archive and the written word.

For these reasons, attempts to "capture" the verbal presence within this history are both woefully obvious and flawed from the beginning. This argument relies on stating that something is there, obvious to some, that nevertheless can not present itself to the reader by the nature of its transmission. It is a fair rebuttal to claim that, given the fact that this is a written document, the potential vocalicity of the previous examples is only validated by an athletic flexing of the source material. These examples are certainly textual, and are able to be reproduced, repurposed, or anthologized like any other text. But consider what these texts each attempt to do. In diverse ways, Amiri Baraka, the Kerner Commission report, and "Sparks and Tinder" each beckon to an extra-textual dimension of their presentation. If we understand sound to function as a component for understanding the way in which each text makes sense of the political circumstance of the Newark riots, it becomes a way to define how each stretches the limits of textuality. We might expect this from Baraka, who, if at least in his artistic chronology, is first and foremost a poet. A writer who, from the beginning, sought to reorient his poetry through vocal performance; an activist who, following the events of July 1967, emerges as a prominent speaker in black power activist circles. While these facets of Baraka's career do bear on this study, they carry their own complex dimensions that have caused them to remain largely unnoticed in this study. Another, more comprehensive study would be able to square the topics discussed above with the

burgeoning career of Amiri Baraka as local activist that was beginning to form in the years following the Newark riots. As the power dynamics of the city shifted and black political leadership expanded, Baraka's celebrity would reach a zenith as he became the voice of black radical politics on the local and national levels. I chose to focus on the years before this celebrity to concentrate on his written work rather than his roles in local politics. This is an issue of tracking and containing the mass of content, written and spoken, that Baraka produced in the late 1960s and 1970s. By limiting the scope of this study to Baraka's published political writing around the Newark riots, I hope to exhibit the written Baraka while remaining cognizant of the literal conversations inspiring and rebutting the arguments made in *Raise Race Rays Raze*.

Though Black Power did have a lasting effect on the city, most notably with the election of Kenneth Gibson and the flourishing of black arts programs including Baraka's Spirit House, the city never recovered from the destruction of one week in 1967. The destruction of property accelerated the deindustrialization that was already crippling the Newark economy by the 1960s. *Raise Race Rays Raze* allows us to see an alternative vision, one man's idealistic and imaginary playing out of history. With any document locked in conversation with a specific set of historical circumstances, returning to it as an artifact always presents the ironies of time; the claims and ideas that run counter to what inevitably occurred may seem hollow given how "wrong" they turned out to be. Yet, with Baraka's work, it continues to provoke and prod, as the text's idiosyncrasies not only showcase his radical philosophical reaction to Newark, but capture the momentary or reactionary feeling transitioning into the temporally cemented place of text. He could have only used his popular position to give speeches, spreading his philosophies within the city's community. By publishing *Raise Race Rays Raze*, Baraka captured the spirit of his

interpretation of the events changing the city, and himself, in 1967. The aggression of his prose, his seeming uncomfortability with literary conventions he had previously utilized, the radical interpretations of the events that unfolded all place the text at a distance from other texts on the riots of the 1960s. Though he was often portrayed in a negative light by news media, an antagonism that was at least partially cultivated by Baraka himself, his work finds unique niches when read in concert with *Time*. Likewise, the reading of Baraka and the Kerner Commission doesn't only serve to remind us that we can make seemingly disjointed ideas mesh together, but that orienting our study towards a different interest (sound) might in fact create a new avenue for understanding a larger question, such as the relationship of aesthetics and politics. In many ways, creating strange or unexpected orientations might be the most fitting way to study a writer who was never one thing and who seldom stayed in the same frame of mind for long. While we can find the peculiarities of any writer the longer we sit with their work, Baraka's texts occasionally leave us no choice *but* to reach for a strange device. By employing these devices, the writer is tasked with meeting a difficult subject through a difficult or potentially unwieldy approach. This study can only portray itself as a first step towards something greater, a suggestion for fresh and questioning interventions into the work of a man whose career remains critically underlooked.

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